

# ダンガンロンパ/ゼロ

DANGANRONPA / ZERO

## CHAPTER 1



Junko Enoshima despaired.

Everything turned out just the way she expected...  
Everything turned out just the way she hoped... and so she despaired.

...Huh? Is it really that easy?

Magma-like heat boiled up deep inside her stomach, gradually swelled inside her body, and exploded when it reached her chest. The explosion escaped her heart and reached every muscle in her body, bringing her to a complete standstill. The sound of splashing water came from the muddy pool she stood in as droplets of water danced through the air.

On closer examination, one could notice the water was red.

As soon as her body stopped moving, the red droplets of water came raining down, making grotesque patterns on her clothes and skin.

Her clothes, painted deep red with blood.

Her skin, painted deep red with blood.

Her face, painted deep red with blood.

Nevertheless, none of this caught her attention. Instead, she started tapping her foot impatiently. It was a magnificent tap. She put every bit of strength, body, and soul she had into it. Her entire existence. And then, after tapping for a while, Junko Enoshima let out an annoyed yell, as fierce as the roar of a feverish rampaging beast.

"BUT THAT'S NOT ENOUGH!"

Her scream echoed through her surroundings, the noise pouring down as if it was a rock shattering into pieces. But she wasn't done. She continued to scream. "MORE! MORE! I NEED EVEN BETTER DESPAIR-INDUCING DESPAIR!". She continued tapping her foot intently.

Despair-inducing despair. That was what she was after. She wanted not only for the world to despair, but also for despair worthy of her own self.

"MORE MORE MORE! DESPAIR-INDUCING DESPA--"

She stopped mid-thought. Something clicked inside her head, and she stopped moving. Her face froze in a surprised expression, and she stood petrified as if every muscle in her crimson-painted body stopped working.

Then, she let out a weak whisper.

"...Oh, I see."

A series of gears and switches began moving deep inside her skull, sparking pitch black thoughts. A certain object floated up inside her mind. A face. It was a face she knew, of course. The face of a fellow student at Hope's Peak Academy.

"...Урррр."

Her body shivered as she started laughing. The shiver gradually spread to her entire body, and then, she started tapping her foot again.

"Uru... Uruururuururuururuururu."

This time her tapping resembled a dance. She tapped her foot like a girl who couldn't help feeling joyous. A girl who couldn't help having fun.

"Oh, it's so wonderful! So wonderful!"

And, as the face of the person destined to bring her so much wonderful despair kept floating inside her mind --

Her heart overflowing with a strange feeling that almost felt like love --

Junko Enoshima danced to the rhythm of despair.

"Oh, it's going to be so magnificent, this despair!"

Laughing ecstatically, Super High-school Level Despair Junko Enoshima continued dancing. She danced as if she was losing her mind.

That was the beginning. The beginning of a story that ends in despair.



## CHAPTER 2

Hope's Peak Private Academy. An exclusive, government-sanctioned school accepting only students with exceptional abilities. Its stated goal is to raise the future "hope" of the nation, and for that reason, it became known as "The Academy of Hope". It's a source of envy, as it's common knowledge that one can gain great success in life just by being a Hope's Peak graduate. Certainly, many Hope's Peak graduates are now employed in high positions in every field of the professional world, so that statement is not an exaggeration.

There are two requirements to becoming a Hope's Peak student:  
One must be currently enrolled in a high school. One must super-excel at their field of expertise.

Hope's Peak doesn't hold any standard entrance exams, as the academy insists that the things tested by these kind of exams are meaningless for its purposes. Instead, students are scouted for by the academy's staff, who serve as both educators and researchers of extraordinary human ability. Some say Hope's Peak Academy's faculty members are much like parents, who made it their life's mission to find talent and nurture it in their children.

Right now, every member of that extraordinary faculty, as well as the academy itself, is facing an unprecedented, unparalleled crisis.

Hope's Peak Academy's faculty building is located in the academy's eastern quarter, and is the only building on campus students are forbidden to enter. The corridors of that building, usually busy with staff members going back and forth, were now empty and engulfed in an unnatural silence. The laboratories, the private rooms, and the luxurious personal offices had all been abandoned. Every man and woman who usually occupies these locations were currently gathered in a single place.

Meeting room 13.

Hope's Peak Academy's largest meeting room is located on the top floor of the faculty building, and has a maximum capacity of over 300. Nevertheless, with every single faculty member attending, it was fully packed. Not a single empty seat remained next to the long tables lined across the room.

But, for such a huge crowd, the room was relatively quiet. Only a single person's voice could be heard. The voice of Hope's Peak Academy's headmaster, Jin Kirigiri.

He faced the assembled faculty members from his position at the foremost table, and read from a printout he held in his hand. He spoke in an unaffected tone of voice, a blank expression on his face. The words printed on the paper came out of his mouth as if he was nothing more than an automaton reading them out. As far as Kirigiri was concerned, that was his most important duty. It didn't matter how out of the ordinary the subject on hand was. No, he didn't have any time to waste faced with the current state of confusion and unanswered questions. If they had time, there are much more important things they should have been doing --

A voice suddenly rose from the crowd. "Are you saying we're going to cover it up?"

Kirigiri raised his head, and saw three hundred people staring at him intently, waiting for a response.

It wasn't a piercing stare. It was much more uncomfortable than that. Three hundred people stared at him as if they were one entity, and Kirigiri felt every hair on his body tingling. He turned his head toward the four people sitting to his right, trying to escape the stare. They were stationed at the same frontmost table he was, their faces unusually wrinkled. Their eyes were closed, making those wrinkly faces even wrinklier. From Kirigiri's position, it almost looked like the four faces in front of him was one huge, giant wrinkle.

The four members of Hope's Peak Academy's Steering Committee looked as if they were about to give up.

An unintentional bitter smile appeared on Kirigiri's face. *So that's how it's going to be. Oh, well. It's not as if I expected anything else.* With those feelings festering inside his heart, Kirigiri turned back towards the crowd's stare. He put the paper aside. He was going to use his own words from now on.

"Let me make it perfectly clear", he emphasized. "We reached this decision after putting a lot of thought into the matter at the Hope's Peak Academy steering meeting that took place earlier today."

He felt the temperature in the room turning tepid. It was probably because every faculty member's body have grown stiff in attention. Kirigiri sipped from the cup in his hand, and continued.

"We understand, of course, how extremely irregular this decision is."

The wrinkly faces that were as much a part of the "we" he talked about as he was did not move an inch. It was as if they knew from the very beginning he was going to take the situation into his own hands.

"Make no mistake. We are not covering this incident up to escape responsibility. If I could end it all here and now by simply taking responsibility, I would do so in a heartbeat. Unfortunately, this particular incident cannot be dealt with that easily. It doesn't even matter if each and every one of us 'takes responsibility'. We're dealing with a problem that exists in an entirely different dimension."

Kirigiri stopped for a moment, and finished his glass of water in a single gulp, trying to remain calm.

"...Don't get me wrong. I don't think we are completely blameless here. If we were, that 'Parade' out there would not be taking place right now."

Kirigiri pointed a finger at the curtained window. Several people turned to look at it, a severe expression on their faces.

"That 'Parade' has been growing larger and larger lately. The people in it think we're all despicable. Their opinion is not completely unfounded."

Kirigiri paused and moved his gaze across the room, looking at each of the faculty member's faces as if what he was about to say was personally directed at them, individually.

"Nevertheless, I refuse to believe Hope's Peak Academy's thesis, that talent itself is humanity's first and foremost hope, is wrong. You must realize that if information about this incident leaves the walls of this school, we are likely to lose it all. As far as I'm concerned, that would be a gigantic loss for the human race. Every one of our successful graduates I've spoken to feels the same way."

At the mention of Hope's Peak graduates, the crowd stirred a little.

"That's the reason I and the members of Hope's Peak Academy's Steering Committee reached our decision... We concluded that this incident shouldn't be made public after all."

He took a peek at the old men, but they remained still. Their blank expressions made it look as if what was going on did not concern them.

"...As I said before, I know more than anyone how irregular this decision is. Nevertheless, we have a duty, both as educators and as scientists. The duty to protect talent. Should human talent become the target of public hostility, it would be a great tragedy. Furthermore, there is one more thing I want you all to remember."

The three hundred faculty members waited in attention for Kirigiri's next words.

"The crimes committed may be terrible, but it doesn't change the fact that *that student* carries a very special brand of hope we raised all on our own."

The color of the faculty's eyes changed in an instant. They did not stir anymore. Everyone sat in complete silence. No one objected. No one *could* object. His words were narrow-minded, but they reflected the opinions of everyone in the room. They were all acting both as educators and as scientists, researching human talent. And, just like any other scientist becoming obsessed with their area of research, the staff of Hope's Peak Academy were obsessed with talent. Anyone who did not share that obsession did not belong in Hope's Peak.

That's why they listened to Kirigiri's words, and made their decision.

They had to protect their thesis. They had to protect the future they believed in. They had to protect the hope they believed in.

And so, they would do their best to cover up The Worst Incident in Hope's Peak Academy's History.



## CHAPTER 3

A yellow cat peeked out from the thicket to the side of the pavement.

It slowly stepped out of the swaying grass and into the road, waving its long tail as it turned its eyes in anticipation towards me. But its expression soon turned to alertness, and then to fear. The cat, having seen me skipping merrily down the road towards it, must have thought I was about to trample it. It escaped back into the bushes in panic.

But, I didn't care at all. I bathed in the light of the hot sun, let the wind flutter my skirt, and continued my obscene merry skip onward down the road. I was in Hope's Peak Academy's eastern quarter, near the courtyard. Many newly-built facilities were lined up around me, as well as several that were still under construction. As I skipped down the road that twisted between them, I took no special notice of any dirty cats or of my classmates, studying and fraternizing all around. Nor did I derive any happiness from the light touch of the sun after a long stay indoors. No, I skipped down the road with nothing but my destination on my mind.

Not that I'm the kind of girl who'd go skipping around thoughtlessly. I had a reason.

I'm going to meet the boy I like the best in the world!

That said, my reason may have been a good one, but no student in their right mind should go skipping down the road in a campus of a school of as high a pedigree as Hope's Peak Academy. Therefore, it wasn't surprising that other students who happened to walk by looked at me oddly, but... that really has nothing to do with me.

Nothing in the world could stop my skipping. Not a crying girl. Not a couple fighting. Not a student in a wheelchair that has come to a standstill. Not even an anemic student who has fallen down. One thought alone moved my body: *I want to meet him, I love him so much*. I skipped so obscenely that no one would probably find it surprising if I suddenly sprouted wings and flew up towards the sky.

I continued down the road, but...

"...Huh?"

I suddenly came to a stop.

"Which way should I go?"

I looked around in confusion, and realized I didn't recognize any of the landmarks around me. My heart started beating loudly.

No, everything's fine. I calmed myself down and removed a notebook from the backpack I was wearing. On the back page of the notebook, the following sentence was written:

"You're looking for the Neurology lab on the third floor of the Biology building in Hope's Peak Academy's eastern quarter".

I felt a refreshing wind of relief passing through my body. Yeah, that's right! The biology building!

...Um, but where *is* that biology building, anyway?

My heart went noisy once more.

Everything's fine. No need to worry. I nervously flipped through the notebook as if acting on instinct, and my eyes stopped on a page with a crude drawing of a map. Above it, the following was written:

"This is a diagram of Hope's Peak Academy's eastern quarter"

Well done, me! Without thinking, I struck a victory pose.

Soon, I was standing on the raised edge of the fountain that decorated the center of the courtyard, comparing the buildings around me with the map. Literature building, science building, physics building, arts building, math building, P.E. building, linguistics building, staff building... as cold droplets from the fountain kept hitting my thighs, I looked for my destination, the biology building, as if I've never visited it before.

"Ah, it's right over there!"

I finally found the square building, identifiable by its light-green walls. It looked exactly like the note about the biology building in my notebook described it.

"Right!"

I jumped down from the fountain's edge, and started running. Some boys in the area looked at me in surprise. Maybe my skirt flew up for a second during my vigorous leap -- but that really has nothing to do with me.

Anyway, I must reach my destination before I forget!

My ferocious dash led me inside the biology buildA dirty white shirt was sloppily thrown over his body. He was lying face up, his face concentrated on a thick manga magazine he held in his hand. He didn't look at me once.ing, where I soon discovered a flight of stairs at the back of the lobby. I didn't lose momentum for even a second as I ran up the stairs to the third floor. When I reached it, I ran down the corridor, checking the signs next to the doors lined on its walls. Finally, at the very end, I found the sign that read "Neurology Lab".

I hastily stopped in my tracks.

After a quick deep breath, I checked my hair and my smile in a hand mirror. Yep, cute as always! Flashing that same wonderful smile and shouting "G'day!" in my brightest voice, I opened the lab's door... and that's when it happened.

Something flew just past my ear, making a wind-cutting wooshing sound.

"...eek!"

I turned my head in panic, and saw a small blade embedded in the wall behind me, still vibrating from the impact. I jumped back. "W...Why is there a scalpel flying through the air?!", I screeched.

"Don't shout", A chiding voice answered back from inside the lab.

The moment I heard that voice, my heart started beating faster. Thump, thump, went my heart as I turned to look inside the lab. A boy was lying on top of a bed installed in the center of the room.

"...You're late. That's unseemly for someone as ugly as you."

A dirty white shirt was sloppily thrown over his body. He was lying face up, his face concentrated on a thick manga magazine he held in his hand. He didn't look at me once.

"You're also too loud for someone as ugly as you. Speaking of, someone as ugly as you being scared of flying scalpels is weird too."

"W...Wait a second!", I stopped him, my voice showing signs of panic. "I could report you for discrimination if you keep calling me ugly, you know!"

"...Who are you going to report me to? The National Japanese Ugly People Association? That kind of organization would be guilty of discrimination just by existing."

The manga-reading boy who kept calling me ugly was the person in charge of this neurology lab. The doctor in charge of my treatment. My childhood friend. The boy I like most in the world.





He's "Super High-school Level Neurologist", Yasuke Matsuda. I think.

"Oh, I see. You're a member of that association, aren't you. Is that why you're so angry?"

"I...I'm not! I'm not even ugly!"

"...On second thought, you're right. You aren't ugly."

My chest swelled in pride and I flashed a complacent smile. "Yep, that's right! I even checked in my mirror just now and --"

"You're super-ugly."

"Super-ugly?!!"

My shock was considerable, but it didn't take me long to recover enough to come up with a sharp response.

"L...Liar! I'm not super-ugly! If anything, I'm world-class cute!"

Matsuda-kun continued to ignore the fuss I was making, his eyes never leaving the magazine.

"I don't care what the world thinks. Ugliness is subjective and I am free to make my own judgment", he said, as if the matter at hand didn't concern him at all.

"So, so, tell me where you think I'm ugly! I'll go fix it up in surgery!", I said in desperation. "Is it my eyes? My nose? Maybe my mouth? How about my eyebrows?"

"You forgot to mention your heart."

"But I can't fix my heart in surgery!"

"Is that so? Poor you. Honestly, you're beyond help - both your face and your brain aren't any good. I think you can have some success if you make yourself an object of sympathy, though. Go stand in front of a train station and beg for change, or something. I'm sure you'll make lots of money."

I dropped my shoulders, crestfallen. Then I let my hands drop towards the floor and my body droop limply. I was beaten up.

"...By the way, who are you?"

"Eh?", I raised my head in surprise at his unexpected question.

"I can't really tell just by the voice."

"Are you saying you didn't know who you were talking to until now?"

"It's *your* fault. You never told me who you were."

"I...I didn't, but you can recognize me by my look, can't you? See? It's me!"

"I don't have time to look at you", said Matsuda-kun, still absorbed in his book. "I just got to the interesting part."

"Don't have time...? Isn't that just a manga magazine?"

"So what? If you're going to ask, 'What's more important? Me or the manga?', the answer's the same as always. It's the manga."

"I see! If the answer's 'the same as always', that means manga was always more important to you than me! That's cruel! I didn't wanna know that!"

"That's a fine observation, but please just answer the question."

"O...Okay...", Pressured, I took the notebook out of my backpack once more, and observed its front cover.

"Ryouko Otonashi's Memory Notebook". As soon as I saw that title, I remembered. I remembered my own name.

"Um... It seems my name is... Ryouko Otonashi?"

"I know only one person stupid enough to not be sure of her own name."

"...Ah. I think you're talking about me. Probably."

Matsuda-kun let out a big sigh. "Huh. So you weren't someone suspicious after all."

"...Are you trying to say you threw that scalpel earlier because you mistook me for someone suspicious... or something?"

"Exactly. I am not the kind of person who throws sharp objects at acquaintances, after all."

"Liar!", I pointed my index finger straight at Matsuda-kun. "I mean, before you confirmed who I am you told me I was late and that I was too loud for an ugly person! That's proof you knew who I was!"

*Smack!*

Matsuda-kun loudly snapped his manga magazine shut. He leveraged the bed's cushion to jump up out of it, and walked briskly towards me until there was almost no distance between us.



"Eh? What? Why?"

He looked straight into my eyes. My body grew hotter by the second.

"You... remember that?"

"...Huh?"

Matsuda-kun clutched my shoulders strongly with both his hands. He pushed his face close to mine. "Do you remember me calling you ugly when you got here?", he asked slowly.

Seeing Matsuda-kun pressing so close to me with such a serious expression on his face made my heartbeat increase tenfold. "Um... I think so? Heh heh, I guess my condition's a little better today."

Just as the tone of my voice started warming up, he released his hold on my shoulders and turned around to face away from me. Then, still looking away, he whispered as if talking to himself. "Is your condition really better, or is it worse...?"

"...Eh? What do you mean?"

"It's nothing", Matsuda-kun shook his head, and began speaking in a commanding tone. "Go lie on the bed. We have to begin today's treatment."

With my mind still reverberating with the beats of my heart, I removed my backpack and set it aside. Then, I lay down on the bed occupied by Matsuda-kun until just a few minutes ago. As I let my body soak into the soft mat, my nose was filled with the scent of the sheets. Matsuda-kun's scent. I sniffed his scent as I felt the remains of his body warmth engulf my body, and felt as happy as if he was lying next to me, hugging me softly --

"Hehehehehehehe", I laughed an instinctive happy laugh. "hehehehehehehe".

"...Is something funny?", Matsuda-kun grimaced and gave me a hard look. "I realize that's the way dung-beetles laugh, but even though you are one, it's just too gross. Can't you at least try to laugh normally?"

"Hyo hyo hyo hyo hyo"

"What's normal about that? That's even grosser!" Shocked, Matsuda-kun rolled a trolley noisily from the center of the lab. On top of it were several complicated, important-looking machines. He pushed the trolley up to the bed, said "here we go", and started operating one of the machines with a tense expression on his face.

I found myself staring at him work. Silky soft hair. Long almond eyes peeking through it. Long feminine eyelashes. A pointed jaw. Small pale lips. Long white fingers --

"Stop looking at me, Ugly. It's creepy."

...And a sharp tongue.

That's right. That's my Matsuda-kun. I rolled to my side and wrote a note in my notebook.

"...You don't have to write everything down, dung-beetle."

"But, if I don't write it down I'd forget it all!"

Matsuda-kun let out an exaggerated sigh. "...Honestly, your brain's like a bottomless bucket."

A bottomless bucket. It wasn't another one of his cruel jokes. It was true. I forget everything I see and hear after a very short time. I don't know the reason. If I ever knew, I've forgotten it.

But, whatever the reason may be, my forgetfulness is not normal. Of that I'm certain.

"But, it's not like I'm forgetting things because I want to. There's a sickness in my brain, right? I can't help it, so be nice to me!"

"No, I don't think we can just call it 'sickness' and be done with it", Matsuda-kun shook his head lightly.

"The human memory is a complicated thing and there is much we don't know about it. It's still very much a black box. Your situation isn't just a simple sickness that can be dealt with like any other."

As he explained, he stuck suction pads all over my head and my face. The cords running from the suction pads were attached to the machines on the trolley.

"There's a part of the human memory that we call 'episodic memory'. It stores your personal experiences, what you see and hear. The area of the brain responsible for it is called the hippocampus. If something goes wrong there, the brain experiences difficulties in creating and storing new episodes. There's a famous old example about a patient who had the hippocampus removed in surgery and lost all ability to form new memories. After that happened, there has been much research done about the exact role of the hippocampus in relation to memory. That said, even if your hippocampus is malfunctioning, you won't lose your ability to remember or learn 'procedural memory' tasks such as riding a bicycle or using tools. You won't remember the episodes related to those tasks, though. For example, you may remember how to ride a bicycle, but you won't remember *how* you came to be able to ride them... That's it in a nutshell."

"I see... So that's why even though I am very forgetful, I still know how to read and write in my notebook". I held the notebook in question with both of my hands, and nodded thoughtfully.

"Ryouko Otonashi's Memory Notebook"

That notebook was memory itself for me. My one and only indispensable trusted item. As long as I have it, I can probably live a regular life, much like regular people. That said, it seems that this school is a little late in accommodating the memory-challenged, and that I am still facing many difficulties on that front. For example, during exams it's forbidden to look in notebooks, which caused my grades to plummet and got me suspended from --

"What? I've been suspended from the school?!", I yelled, looking up from the notebook. "Just because my grades are bad?! That's not fair!"

"You should be glad they haven't kicked you out completely. I had to negotiate with the school to make that happen."

"Eh? You stood up for me?". My heart skipped a beat. "I'm so happy! Heh heh. You really are fond of me, aren't you."

Matsuda-kun snorted. "...I just need you here as a research subject."

Nevertheless, Matsuda-kun went out and helped me, and that's good enough!

"Your case seems to involve a failure in the retrieval of long-term memory. I think something went wrong with the synapses connecting the neurons somewhere in your brain, but I need more time to investigate the problem more thoroughly before I can really understand what's going on."

"I didn't understand most of what you said, but... at least I haven't been expelled! If I get expelled now, where would I even go?" I don't have anywhere to go to outside this school. I've forgotten everything else. I don't even remember my family, or any old friends I may or may not have. "If I get expelled, I will also end up away from you, Matsuda-kun..."

Being separated from Matsuda-kun was the thing I feared most. My body shivered a little just speaking the words out loud.

"You shouldn't worry too much." Matsuda-kun turned to face me and spoke bluntly. "You are a valuable research subject and I don't plan to lose you... at least not at the moment."

"But, you might change your mind later!"

I'm happy, but I have to remember not to be too much of a burden from now on!

"Don't complain. You should be honored that you're participating in such important research." Matsuda-kun chided me, and then continued his explanation. "In order to understand why memory loss occurs, we need to understand the core elements of our brain's memory storage apparatus. Once we make advances in that field, it opens the doors to a wide array of possibilities, like improving the quality and longevity of human memory, or developing medicine to prevent memory loss. In the future, we might even be able to treat memories like we do data on a hard drive - we'll be able to create devices that back them up or destroy parts of them freely. There's already research going on that front abroad. They managed to erase lab rats' long-term memory by manipulating their M-zeta kinase enzyme."

"I see!"

In fact, I didn't see at all, but for the time being I had to be agreeable. "In any case, I'm just super-happy that I can be any help to my beloved Matsuda-kun!"

"Your brain is empty, and so are the words it produces. You really are an empty woman."

I didn't quite understand if he was serious or just making fun of me.

But, that's just how Matsuda-kun is.

He always insisted I should take care of myself. He may be cold to me and he may be blunt, but he doesn't treat me with fake sympathy. It's depressing when people do, so I'm grateful for his attitude.

"I may be empty but I'm still super-happy!" I raised my voice, refusing to be discouraged, but Matsuda-kun's reply was almost a whisper.

"Well, I can't deny you're helping me out here. One doesn't get his hands on such a rare case very often..."

"Did you say rare?! I like the sound of that word!" I felt as happy as if I was being praised. "So what's rare about me? Tell me! Tell me! Tell me!"

"Stop acting like a child.", Matsuda-kun let out a big sigh. "I don't want to tell you. You'd just get annoyingly excited."

"What's so wrong with that? Tell me! Tell me!"

My insistence finally paid off. "...You don't often see someone possessing such a superb, brain-intensive talent as you do affected by memory loss. That's why you're such a rare case."

"...Talent? Brain-intensive?" Nothing came to my mind.

"It's fine if you don't remember it... It was really irritating when you used that talent of yours. I'm warning you - don't ever try to use it on me. You got that, dung-beetle?"

I didn't quite get what he meant, but his dung-beetle comment stung my heart a little bit so I couldn't help but nod in agreement. "Well, I don't really care as long as I get to spend these intimate moments with you, Matsuda-kun. I should be thankful that there's sickness in my brain!"

"I told you, it's not really a sickness..." Matsuda-kun stuck even more suction cups to my head, as if he was trying to hide my grinning face. "Nevertheless, It's admirable that you can take this so easily. Your condition is no laughing matter. Shouldn't you be at least a little worried?"

"...Eh? What is there to be worried about?"

"I mean", said Matsuda-kun in amazement, "aren't you worried whether these symptoms are ever going to go away?"

"...Eh?" His words surprised me. It wasn't like Matsuda-kun at all, asking a question like that in such a serious voice. "Ahahaha! I'm not worried at all!", I laughed, trying to lighten the mood. "I mean, the only me I can remember is the me that is lying here on this bed at this very moment. I can't remember anything from before I lost like memory, so it's not like I have anything to compare it too. That's why I don't see my forgetfulness as a disadvantage... it's just a part of who I am."

"You don't see it as a disadvantage... but aren't you even worried about how this memory loss started, or when it's going to end?"

"Not at all. In fact, I'm much more worried that if I suddenly get cured I wouldn't get to see you any more, Matsuda-kun."

The room suddenly turned quiet.

After the silence continued for a while, Matsuda-kun broke it with a whisper.

"You don't have to worry" He said, his voice suddenly dark. "I won't let this treatment end."

I looked up. The face peeking through his pitch-black hair was stiff, lost in thought.

"Matsuda-kun?"

As soon as I called him, he straightened up and turned back to me.

"No, it's nothing..." He shook his head, as if trying to smooth things over. Then, he returned to the machine and continued working it as if nothing happened. "Well, nothing good can come out of being too pessimistic about of your symptoms. That's one case where your natural cheerfulness is actually helpful."

"Yep! My thinking's very flexible, after all!"

"Your head is flexible, that's for sure. You can't even remember your friends or family before you lost your memory, and yet you aren't even slightly disconcerted."

"But, forgetting them is just like I never had them at all! That's why everyone I forgot -- they really have nothing to do with me anymore!"

"Those words again." Matsuda-kun winked for an awfully long time. "If you keep saying things have nothing to do with you, you're going to end up with nothing left inside."

"Oh, I'll be fine! I will always have you, Matsuda-kun!", I stuck my chest in pride. "You're the only person I can remember, so as long as you're here, I won't get lonely."

"...You probably link me with the process of coming here to receive this treatment in your procedural memory. That's why you can remember me."

"No, that's not it at all --"

"Yeah, yeah. I know", said Matsuda-kun, trying to calm me down before I became too flustered. He continued attaching suction cups to my face, stopping from time to time to scratch his chest, which I could catch a glimpse of through a gap in his dirty white shirt. Does he really know what I meant? He probably just said that to shut me up. I don't think he even believed me when I said I remembered him.

But it's true.

I don't remember him in the usual sense of the word "remember", of course. But I didn't lie when I said I do.

I remember Matsuda-kun.

I forget him, and yet I remember.

I'm not talking about our conversations, or what we did together. For these kind of memories I have to rely on my notebook. No, what I remember is something much more special and important!

It's not memories, but feelings. Not using my head, but using my heart. What I remember about Matsuda-kun is pure emotion. Every time I see him, I feel my the beat of my heart before my head even realizes what's going on. That beat tells me one very important thing.

For me, his very existence is precious. One-of-a-kind.

That's why, no matter how forgetful I become, I will never forget him. There's a connection deeper than memories between the two of us. For me, Matsuda-kun is special. He's extraordinary. He's a miracle --

"Shut up already, will you?"

"Eh?", I came back to my senses, confused. "Y...You heard me?". I was about to jump out of the bed, but Matsuda-kun pinned my head back down.

"You're going to get the cord disconnected. What are you, human waste?", he said cruelly, as if I tried disconnect his cord on purpose.

"B...But, I never said a word... Ah, were you talking about how loud my heartbeat is? I can't help that! If my heart stops, I'd die!"

"...I wasn't talking about you. I was referring to the noise outside."

"Eh? Outside?"

Matsuda-kun turned up his chin, and pointed to the window. When I listened intently, I could indeed hear an unusual noise coming from outside.

Jeering voices, angry voices, hooting voices. Reactionary voices full of anger. The kind of voices that could make the earth rumble. It was an assembly of unpleasant voices that could make your face frown instinctively.

"...What *is* that?"

"It's the 'Parade'. They're getting louder every day..."

"A parade? You don't mean, *that* parade?!"

"Liar. You don't remember it at all." Matsuda-kun pinched my forehead, and continued explaining. His face was grim. "It's essentially a demonstration. But the teaching staff, or maybe I should say the old geezers in the steering committee, didn't like the sound of that word so they decided to call it a stupid name like a 'Parade'".

"...But, isn't a parade the exact opposite of a demonstration?"

"That's exactly why they chose that name"

"But, why a parade...?"

"It's the guys from the preparatory school."

"Preparatory school...?" I've never heard of such a thing. Or have I?

"You don't remember, of course. Well, your head is oversized, so I guess it can't be helped."

"Wait! Calling a girl oversized is a sexual harassment! If this was the Edo period you would be beheaded by now -- eep!" My head, which was on its way up from the bed, was pushed back down.

"Hope's Peak Academy is not a traditional learning facility like other schools. They provide education for the talented, but at the same time they research that talent. The teaching staff aren't simple educators. They're also scientists who research human talent. ...But, scientists are a bothersome bunch. The more they research, the more they want to research even deeper. Therefore, there's something they never have enough of. Do you know what that is?"

"Um... It's probably..."

"It's money."

"Oh, right!" My chance to find the answer on my own was gone, so that's the least I could say.

"Up until recently, Hope's Peak Academy was a small-scale facility that could survive on a government subsidiary and graduate donations. Their research was often blocked by a lack of resources, though. But, the steering committee was not satisfied with the state of the research, so they instituted the preparatory school system in order to bring in more money."

I nodded enthusiastically to show I was listening.

"The gist of it is that us Super High-school Levels are affiliated with the main school, but there is now a separate educational facility attached to it, called a preparatory school. That school is located on the west quarter of the campus, while the main school remains here in the east quarter, so we don't actually intermingle much. I heard there's not much that's the same over there -- they don't scout their students, and rely on a regular entrance exam to choose among applicants. Their teaching staff is chosen the same way. Our teachers are the scientists who work and live at the school, while they have regular teachers coming from outside."

"So, it's just a regular high-school, isn't it?"

"Exactly. Nevertheless, there was a flood of applications. A brand name is a powerful thing." Matsuda-kun almost spat the words out. "People didn't care that it was just a preparatory school. The prestigious Hope's Peak Academy had finally opened its doors to the public. People are sheep. They are drawn to a name, and the school took advantage of that to get more money. Thanks to that, the school went through a sudden growth sprout. We suddenly have research buildings that can make any university jealous. No one was prepared for that -- in just a year or two Hope's Peak Academy became a school of an entirely different scale. The power of the steering committee also grew accordingly."



"But, that almost seems like a fraud..."

"It doesn't just *seem* like one." Matsuda-kun's mouth twisted in a bitter smile. "Right now, Hope's Peak Academy is set up like a third world country's pyramid class system. The multitude of students in the preparatory school exist only to support the few Super High-school Levels in the main one. It seems they have some kind of bogus system in place for exceptional students to transfer to the main school, but I've never heard of anyone actually succeeding. Our teachers probably don't think any of them deserve it."

"Eh? That's not how educators should behave!"

"You're right, but it's exactly how scientists do. They don't care about anything but their research subject. I'm just the same, in fact. It's just that their subject is 'human talent'."

"But, it's so unfair!" I puffed my cheeks.

"Of course it is. If it wasn't, there wouldn't be any need for a demonstration, would there? But, still..."

Matsuda-kun suddenly cut his speech short. His tone of voice changed to a cautious one.

"I don't think they could've set all this up on their own. This has to be the result of someone else's scheme. That's how I feel..."

"Eh?"

Matsuda-kun narrowed his eyes and looked outside the window. His look was so grim that I hesitated to speak.

"Hey, Ugly," after a short while he turned back to me, as if remembering something. "Write this conversation down properly in your notebook. Don't brush it off as having nothing to do with you. Those preparatory school students don't think much of us. I don't think they're going to attack you or anything, but... it's better to be cautious."

"Okay, I understand.", as I replied, I noticed the suction cups stuck to my head and my face were making it difficult to move my mouth.

"I need you to stay still for a while. I don't mind if you sleep." Matsuda-kun stepped away from my line of sight.

"But, I'm not sleepy at all..." I replied in an insecure voice. Matsuda-kun's voice answered from the other side of the room.

"I can give you sleeping pills. A dozen should probably be enough."

"Eh? Isn't that a lethal dose? Are you sure it's alright?"

As soon as my uneasiness grew even deeper, Matsuda-kun appeared in front of me again. He was now wearing a school jacket on top of his dirty shirt.

"If something happens to my machines while I'm gone, you're dead."

"...Are you going somewhere?"

"I have a little business to take care of. Anyway, if something happens to my machines, you're dead." He was serious enough to repeat the warning twice.

"I wouldn't mind being killed if it's you who kills me..."

"It would be troublesome for me. I hate gore."

I didn't think that was such a good quality for someone who studies the human brain, but I didn't say anything.

"Ah! In that case, if I stay here and wait like a good girl, let's go see a movie together later!"

"...A movie?"

"Um... You know, like that one..."

I flipped through the pages of my notebook, searching for memories about movies.

"Here's one! Um, it's about two robbers, Harry and Marv, sneaking into the McAllister household..."

"Are you talking about Home Alone? It seems you've forgotten, but you bugged me to see it with you before, and we did."

"Really? Um, in that case..." I continue flipping through the notebook, but couldn't find mention of any other movies. It seems I was particularly interested in that movie. I could blame myself all day, but it'd get me nowhere.

"W...Well, it's a masterpiece, so I'm sure it's still interesting even if you watch it again!"

"It's certainly not a bad movie, but it's not the kind of movie I'd want to watch again and again..."

"So, what kind of movie do you --"

"Please don't ask me questions fit for the diary of a middle-school girl"

I felt his distasteful stare glaring down at me. But, I didn't give up. "Let's do it! If you pretend you're watching for the first time, it's going to be fun!". I read a little more in my notebook. "Ah! According to this, I thought that the little boy who played the main character, Wacooly Culkin, is super-cute! There's a cute boy in this movie! Isn't this exciting?"

"And why, exactly, do you think that would excite me? Also, that actor isn't named as if he was a brand of lingerie. It's Macaulay Culkin."

"Ha ha, it says here that I thought he was so cute I wanted to adopt him!"

"You only say that because you don't know how he looks today. He underwent quite a transformation."

"A transformation, huh..."

Matsuda-kun narrowed his almond eyes even more than usual, and swiped his bangs away from his forehead.

"Just be a good girl and go to sleep."

It seems he was tired of me trying to postpone his departure.

"Wait! Don't go!" Nevertheless, now panicking, I tried to stop him again. "I don't want you to go! I'd be lonely! Don't leave me here alone! We haven't seen each other in a long time, have we?"

"...A long time?" Matsuda-kun stopped in his tracks. "Why do you think we haven't seen each other in a long time?"

"...Eh?"

"I'm asking why you think we haven't seen each other in a long time."

Matsuda-kun faced away from me as he spoke. His voice was tinted with pain, and made me feel anxious.

"Um... I can tell by the rate my heart was beating... I think..."

"So, if you see me every day your heart doesn't beat as fast when I'm near?"

"N...No! That's not it --"

"We did meet just yesterday, you know."

"...Eh? We did?"

"It's not surprising that you forgot..." Matsuda-kun's back curled forward, as if he was dejected. "I guess you were just lying when you said I'm the only one you can remember."

"W...Wait! I'll remember in a second!"

In haste, I flipped through the pages of my notebook. I went through them all from back to back, but I couldn't find any memories of me and Matsuda-kun meeting the day before. It was a complete failure.

When I looked away from the notebook, Matsuda-kun was already gone.

"...feh!" I've been had. And there was nothing more I could do about it.

Sigh. I guess there really is nothing I can do but sleep.

Not that that's such a bad thing.

At the very least, when I'm asleep I can lose myself inside my dreams. I can escape this lonely world that doesn't have Matsuda-kun in it. I can probably even meet Matsuda-kun in my dreams!

With that thought deep in my heart, I rolled to my side, careful not to disturb the cords all over my head, and sniffed the pillow that still had traces of Matsuda-kun's scent. I sniffed it as if I was a puppy, and rubbed my cheeks against it, purring happily. Then, I closed my eyes.

As my vision blacked out, my other senses sharpened. Before long, the only thing remaining in my world was Matsuda-kun's scent...

No, that wasn't the only thing.

I could also hear voices, interfering with my and Matsuda-kun's private world. An assembly of emotional, unsettling voices. Anxiety washed over my entire body just by listening to them, so I blocked my ears in panic.

...It has nothing to do with me, after all.

Nevertheless, I couldn't sleep. I felt like my body forgot how to.

I want to fall asleep.

I want to sleep and tide over this world that doesn't have Matsuda-kun in it.

I want to meet him again.

...Matsuda-kun Matsuda-kun Matsuda-kun Matsuda-kun Matsuda-kun Matsuda-kun Matsuda-kun Matsuda-kun. And then, as I dreamed about dreaming about Matsuda-kun, I slowly fell into a blissful sleep.



## CHAPTER 4

A short while after leaving the laboratory, Yasuke Matsuda stood in front of a large door that exuded a solemn atmosphere and straightened his posture.

*What are you so nervous about?* He wanted to mock himself, but at the same time realized nervousness was inevitable. It was the first time he'd ever stepped into Hope's Peak Academy's inner sanctum, the staff building. It was the only building on the campus' east quarter that students were forbidden to enter, and sure enough - once he did he ended up having to explain the situation to several teachers who stopped him along the way. That wasn't enough, though - his final destination was itself a special place, even inside this forbidden building.

Yasuke Matsuda raised his head and stared at the door in front of him.

It was a pretentiously decorated wooden door that gave him the feeling visitors weren't welcome. The metal plate set in it read "Hope's Peak Academy's Steering Committee Meeting Room". This was the inner sanctum's inner sanctum. Even the teaching staff could not just walk in uninvited. Nervousness really was inevitable for someone about to enter such a special room. But, nevertheless --

"This really isn't like me..."

Matsuda cleared his throat. He tried to cheer himself up before he ended up swallowed whole by the oppressing atmosphere. Then, he raised his fist and knocked twice on the door.

"This is Yasuke Matsuda, from Hope's Peak Academy's 77th class", he announced, slowly pushing the heavy door open. "...Excuse me."

The room was as different from a classroom as a room could be. The ceiling, pillars and walls were excessively decorated, in a way that Matsuda found gloomy. He stepped forward, the sound of his footsteps swallowed by the thick carpet.

"We apologize for calling you here on such a short notice". The voice was surprisingly light and cheerful. It belonged to Hope's Peak Academy's headmaster, Jin Kirigiri. Every time Matsuda saw the man he couldn't help but be astounded how young he was. In his mind, a headmaster was a middle-aged man with white hair, a mustache and a drab suit. Kirigiri, still in his thirties, was just too young for the job.

"Please sit down. It would be easier to have a conversation that way."

A large circular table stood in the middle of the room. Antique chairs were lined up all around it. "Excuse me", said Matsuda as he sat on the nearest chair, placing him exactly across the table from Kirigiri. The moment he sat down, he felt several pairs of eyes staring intently at him. They belonged to four old men who sat around the table at set intervals. Every one of them wore a pitch-black suit, as if they were on their way back from a funeral. Their ties were the same color. Their appraising glare felt to Matsuda as if someone was breathing their hot breath down the back of his neck.

"Do you know who we are?"

The voice was rusty, and Matsuda couldn't tell which old man it belonged to.

"You must be the members of Hope's Peak Academy Steering Committee."

"You have our sincere gratitude for all your help with *that* incident".

".....I don't know what you're talking about."

The wrinkles on the old men's faces deepened. They didn't like dodging around the topic of the conversation.

"There is no need to be cautious here. We know everything", one of the old men said. "You helped us with the interrogation of the student who first discovered the crime scene, didn't you?", said another.

The student who first discovered the crime scene. The second Matsuda heard those words, his heart began to beat faster. He tried to hide it by asking a question of his own. "...Do you intend to try and get more information out of that student?"

"Not at all", a different old man shook his hand. "This time, we are dealing with a different student. We have a problem, you see. A problem that someone with your skills can solve. We are looking forward for your help". He talked as if the matter was already settled. That was worrying.

"...What if I refuse?"

A few seconds of silence later, one of the old men started to laugh. It was a quiet laugh at first, but soon the second, third, and then the fourth old man joined, filling the room with scornful laughter. Their voices descended on Matsuda from every angle.

"So, Matsuda-kun", the laughter suddenly stopped. "Do you really believe you have a choice in the matter?" The old man spoke in a condescending tone of voice. "That girl you've been treating... It seems she's on temporary leave from the school, yet there aren't any signs that she's going to be cured."

This time, it was Matsuda's wrinkles that deepened as he frowned. "...What are you trying to say?"

"You are also still a student. We can't have you wasting your time on a dunce with no hope of recovery". His words were overflowing with contempt. "The way we see it, we can't keep extending a student's temporary leave when we don't even know when she'll be able to return. This faculty's purpose is to nurture talent. Those who are too much of a failure to use it should simply step down, for the other students' sake... That said, if you agree to help us..."

"Shut the gently caress up, old man."

"...Wha--!"

"Your dirty mouth talks too much."

The room's atmosphere changed in a second. The air pressure jumped all at once.

"Y...You bastard...!"

Matsuda stood up and the old men froze. He looked at them as if they were worms. No, his stare was much more angry and full of contempt -- he looked at them as if they were worms he was about to trample.

"Dunce? Failure? I should've warned you. I am the only one who's allowed to make fun of her. No one else has any right to."

"H...Hey! Who do you think you're talki--"

"I told you to shut up."

His tone really did shut them up. He continued speaking in a low voice.

"That girl... Even when people make fun of her, she swipes it off because she thinks it has 'nothing to do with her'. That's why I have to speak up for her. I won't be able to live with myself if I don't."

To the ears of the Steering Committee members, his words carried an indescribable sense of intimidation. *How can we be so overpowered by someone not yet in his twenties?* They did not know the answer.

They did not understand the power someone who possessed talent had. The power Hope's Peak Academy called "Hope".

"...Um, may I interrupt?" A slow voice forced its way into the conversation. It was Kirigiri's voice. Matsuda turned his coercive stare towards him.

"It's just that I think It's time for me to say something..." Kirigiri smiled bitterly and scratched his head.



Despite the nervous atmosphere that filled the room, he seemed completely calm. Matsuda, having lost his momentum, closed his eyes slowly, let out a heavy sigh and sat back down. As soon as he was done, Kirigiri continued in a quiet tone.

"Matsuda-kun, we are merely asking for a favor. Not a favor just for us -- you can consider it a favor to every student of Hope's Peak Academy. Would you please at least consider listening to what we have to say?"

Matsuda stayed quiet and looked at Kirigiri, unable to judge what the man's true intentions were. Kirigiri, on his part, tried his best to take back control of the situation. "I won't ask you to do anything other than listen. If you decide to refuse, we will accept your decision". With the preliminaries done, he moved straight to the topic on hand.

"I probably do not have to explain to you about *that incident*, but we should probably still begin there anyway". Kirigiri cleared his throat, clasped both his hands in front of himself, and continued. "It's been a month and we still can't believe what had happened. Such a gruesome incident taking place inside Hope's Peak Academy... I still feel like we're living in a nightmare."

"But, it really did happen!", yelled one of the old men.

"Thirteen kids!", screamed another. "Thirteen victims, and the details of what happened are still unclear! Why did such a terrible thing happen in our school?!"

When the screaming voices stopped, Matsuda said what has been on his mind. "So... you never informed the police?"

"Of course we didn't! What do you think would happen if we did?! What would it solve?! This is not a problem that can be taken care of by arresting a culprit!"

"But... what about the victims' families?"

"We're taking care of that!" yet another old man yelled without skipping a beat. "You don't have to worry about such things!"

Judging by the way he spoke, the academy had already taken measures for dealing with the families. They must have asked some favors from previous graduates. Many of them rose to high positions on the strength of the Hope's Peak brand - if that brand falls from grace, they will also lose it all.

"...You're right, I shouldn't have to worry about that. So, what is it that you want me to do? This 'other student' you were talking about -- they must have something to do with this incident as well, right?"

"We want you to extract information out of that student that will help clarifying the truth behind this incident", answered Kirigiri.

"Clarify the truth...? Isn't that a contradiction? Didn't you decide to cover up the incident?"

The cover-up. Matsuda was the only student the faculty trusted with the secret. In exchange for his cooperation, he was awarded a large research grant and equipment for his lab. That was probably another proof that he was a true scientist.

But, that wasn't the only reason he agreed to cooperate. No one but Matsuda himself knew the other reasons.

"Yes, it does sound like a contradiction, doesn't it", answered Kirigiri after a short hesitation. "But, this is a necessity. We strongly believe that hiding this incident is necessary, but there is too much we still don't know about. We can't hide something we don't completely understand. That's why we think we must find the entire story regarding what happened back then. In order to protect Hope's Peak Academy... this cover-up has to be perfect."

Kirigiri said all that without the slightest sign of doubt. He would do anything to protect Hope's Peak Academy. *He's just like me, isn't he?*, Matsuda thought.

Sacrificing something to protect something else - *That's exactly what I'm also doing right now.*

"...So who is this student you want me to interrogate?"

Kirigiri licked his dry lips, and gave Matsuda a cautious answer. "We didn't tell you this before, but other than the first discoverer of the crime scene, there are two additional survivors."

Two survivors... Sure enough, that was the first time Matsuda heard about them.

"They are indispensable for discovering the truth about the incident, of course. Had all been well, we should've questioned them immediately after we were done with the crime scene's discoverer... But, because of certain circumstances, we couldn't do that."

"...Circumstances?"

"One of them has been in a coma since the incident. The other, thankfully, came out unhurt, but... went missing soon after. We do not know where that student is right now."

One comatose student, and one missing student. The circumstances were indeed severe. But, there was still a possibility --

"You want me to try and get information from the comatose student, don't you?"

Kirigiri nodded. "Exactly."

Finding the truth in order to hide it. It was certainly a twisted thing to do, but it was also very convenient for Matsuda.

*This is probably my chance. My chance to protect her.*

"I understand", he said. He had no other choice. "I'll see what I can do."

"Do you think you can do something?" One of the old men quickly relaxed and tried to regain authority.

"It's still too early to tell. It depends on the student's exact condition. I will try my best, in any case", Matsuda answered bluntly, and returned to face Kirigiri. "But, what about the missing student? You aren't going to just sit here doing nothing, are you?"

After a short silence, Kirigiri bent forward and looked straight into Matsuda's eyes. "...Is something worrying you?"

His gaze was sharp, and Matsuda felt as if it could read his innermost thoughts. Wanting to escape it, he retracted quickly. "No, I was just curious". His voice was shaky, and he continued in an effort to hide it. "I mean, a missing student is far too suspicious, isn't it? Don't you think they could be the culprit who killed thirteen students and left one in a coma?"

The old men immediately started rustling, their whispers reverberating through the meeting room. Kirigiri alone kept his cool.

"It's just as you say. The way things look, that student is extremely suspicious."

"In that case --"

"In that case, what?" Kirigiri interrupted forcefully. "It just justifies covering-up this incident even more. If we don't... it's going to be the end of this school."

*The end of this school...?*

Matsuda was intrigued by Kirigiri's expression.

*Does that mean that the student who has gone missing is someone special?*

A certain name suddenly found itself floating in the back of Matsuda's mind. He had heard that name only in rumors and in occult stories he always thought were urban legends. But, if that person really exists, they may very well be involved in this incident.

If that's the case, it all makes sense. It even makes sense calling this incident "The Worst Incident in Hope's Peak Academy's History".

It makes sense, but it's also terrible.

A single drop of sweat fell down from Matsuda's temple as he whispered those words deep inside his heart.



"Ow!"

I collapsed on the corridor's floor from the excessive force of Matsuda-kun's shove. It was a small mercy that I had clean underpants on.

"The next treatment is in three days. Be a good girl and stay in your room. Don't go out on needless walks", said Matsuda-kun before I could even get up, and then shut the door loudly behind him.

"Uuuu... He tricked me..."

My shoulders drooped, but since there was nothing I could do I simply left the neurology lab, crestfallen. As I exited the biology building, the first thing I did was check my notebook. I had to go back to the dorms, but since I forgot where they were, I flipped through the pages of "Ryouko Otonashi's Memory Notebook" as I walked. Eventually, I found the school map it seemed I drew all by myself. I guess this is a good time to do a full scale review of my notes, and explain the full picture regarding Hope's Peak Academy.

Here we go.

According to my map, Hope's Peak Academy's campus is shaped like a large diamond. It's divided into four quarters - East, West, South and North, each the size of a full-scale regular high-school. The East quarter - through which I walked now - was the heart of the academy, where the buildings and facilities used by the main school are located. Many of its buildings were still under construction, but there were also several magnificent, envy-inducing research buildings for various fields, much like Matsuda-kun's Biology Building. In addition, it seems this quarter is also home to the staff building, which students are forbidden to enter.

Then there's the west quarter. It seems the buildings and facilities for the preparatory school are located there, but I don't think I've ever visited it. Unfortunately, there isn't much written in my notebook about it.

The south quarter is where Hope's Peak Academy's student dormitories are. In addition, it seems there's a convenience store, a bookstore, and various other shops where necessary supplies can be bought. By the way, it seems only students belonging to the main school are allowed to live in the dorms, and that it's a special perk that doesn't even cost money.

Then there's the north quarter, which is apparently currently vacant. The only thing left there is the old school building, which was still in use until just recently. For the time being it seems it's been left neglected, so naturally entrance is forbidden. In other words, there isn't much to say about it.

Finally, at the very center of the campus, surrounded by the four quarters, is the "central plaza" - a large park-like space overgrown with trees. It's often used as a relaxation area for the students, but it appears entry is forbidden between 10 at night and 7 in the morning. Well, I don't plan on walking around in the middle of the night, so it seems it has nothing to do with me.

...And so, thanks to the information-packed hand drawn map, I managed to make my way to the dorms safely. Then, ignoring the greetings of the students who passed me by in the corridor, I went straight to my room.

When I entered the room, I was met with stickers reading "This is my room" stuck all around. Yep, this is the right place, there's no question about it! After confirming this important fact, I stood near the doorway for a while staring into space. But, no matter how much I tried I couldn't think of anything I wanted to do, so eventually I simply collapsed into my bed. Nevertheless, it seems I already took a midday nap somewhere, because I couldn't fall asleep.

Reluctantly, I decided to kill some time. For me, killing time means exactly one thing. I took out "Ryouko Otonashi's Memory Notebook" and, still lying on the bed, started flipping through its pages.

Everything that's written down in this notebook is the undeniable truth, but I can't remember any of it. In other words, it feels like I'm reading a non-fiction book about myself. The excitement of experiencing my own past vicariously is an amazing form of entertainment that only someone as forgetful as myself can enjoy.

I read about what I talked with Matsuda-kun about, and what he said to me. Most of the notebook was about Matsuda-kun, but that's exactly what makes it so much fun. Then, as I continued flipping through the notebook, my eyes stopped on one single page.

That page was packed with sketches of a boy's face. My heartbeat... wasn't as fast as it could be but increased slightly in speed.

These are probably portraits of Matsuda-kun. But, since my heart isn't beating that fast, they're probably not very good likenesses. Maybe I should try to make some amendments?

"Hmmm... I think the nose is all wrong. No, maybe it's the eyes...?"

I can't really remember what Matsuda-kun's face looks like, but I used my heartbeat as a measure and carefully took to redrawing the sketches. That's probably how bomb disposal personnel feel when they go searching for land mines. No, I guess it's a little different.

And so, after messing with the portrait for a little bit, I felt my heart beating a little bit faster than it did before.

"I did it...", I couldn't wipe the smile off my face. If I just continue fiddling with the sketch little by little, I'm sure it will eventually look just like the real Matsuda-kun. I probably did the exact same thing before -- I just don't remember it. It's just that working on this sketch requires every bit of my concentration, and I can't keep it up for very long. Tired, I placed the notebook next to my pillow, and turned to lie face up. Then, I started to whisper.

*...I want to meet Matsuda-kun. I want to meet Matsuda-kun. I want to meet Matsuda-kun.*

It was the only thing I could do. Right now, the only thing I can do is whisper deep inside my heart how much I want to meet Matsuda-kun. There is nothing else I can think about. Nothing else I can do. Nothing else I *should* do. I can't remember anything else, after all. Not even my family or my other classmates. For me, the people living in the outside world and what they do feels just like watching a boring stage play from the sidelines. I can't treat them as real beings. I don't even feel I live in the same world they do. Noisy classrooms, sweat-drenched PE lessons, festive lunchtimes, stopping to grab a bite after club activities, sitting on the ground chatting with friends, embarrassing conversations with the family... I can't even feel envy or regret that I'm missing these things out. They simply have nothing to do with me, and that's it.

But, the only existence keeping me from being entirely cut off from the world... is Matsuda-kun.

And that's why I can't think of anything else but him.

I don't stop for a second to think about any other thing. *I want to meet Matsuda-kun. I want to meet Matsuda-kun. I want to mee--Thump.*

There was a strange sound, and I came back to my senses. I raised myself from the bed, and found a letter shoved under the room's door.

"It's from Matsuda-kun!"

It was the logical conclusion to make, and so I jumped to grab the envelope, and hurried to read the letter inside.

"Dear Ms. Super High-school Level Pitiful Forgetful Girl,  
I have taken all the precious "past memories" you have so meticulously chronicled.  
There are a lot of them, and they all chronicle your past with Yasuke Matsuda.  
That's the entire weight of your past right there, isn't it?

Isn't it? Isn't it?

By the way, if you think I am lying just look under your bed.

That's where you stored all your "memories", but there isn't even a single one left.

That's because I took them all.

Well, then, let's get to the main issue.

If you want your "memories" back, come to the fountain in the central plaza tonight at 1AM.

Come alone, of course.

It's not like you even have anyone to call, is it?

That's fine, then.

That's all. Thank you for your cooperation. I am looking forward to hearing from you."

My body stiffened as I finished reading the letter. It stiffened, and yet it also quivered like a plate of jelly. In other words, I was so disturbed that the previous simile seemed appropriate.

*...A threat?*

*...What's going on?*

*...I don't get it...*



But, this problem couldn't be solved with a few questioning lines. First, I have to check under the bed like the letter said! When I hastily did so, there was nothing there. To tell you the truth, I don't even remember ever storing old notebooks under there, but if I really did and all of my past memories of Matsuda-kun were stolen, it's terrible! It means all I have left is this current notebook I hold in my hand.

*...That's all I have left? Just one measly notebook?*

*...That's what more than 15 years of memories amount to?*

Suddenly, a strange feeling descended upon me. Is that what they call a feeling of loss? Until now, that kind of feeling was unfamiliar to the forgetful me. I'm sure people who learn to live with a small wound have to always endure a certain amount of pain, but that wasn't the case for me. I had no idea how to deal with this new pain I currently felt.

For the time being, I was simply angry.

"Who... Whose idea of a prank is this...?"

My voice was strained and shaky, my fists grasping the letter, crumbling it.

"W...What...? Why...?"

I let my thoughts be led by the anger -- perhaps, this is the work of some sleazeball scheming to get between me and Matsuda-kun's love. I think Matsuda-kun is very handsome and looks cool, so many girls must be after him! For such girls, the growing love between us must be an eyesore, so one of them must have succumbed to desperate measures. She took my memories hostage, and is probably going to do something to me once I answer her call. Oh, she's such a mean woman! My anger reached its boiling point and was about to erupt like Mt. Etna -- but it didn't.

"Hmmm..."

It appears that I have even forgotten how to be properly angry.

But, that was just natural. Someone as uninvolved with the world as I am is a stranger to feelings of anger. Therefore, I had no idea how to funnel it. I guess anger that originates in the imagination alone has its limits. In any case, since I couldn't let my anger out, my feelings rapidly cooled down.

"I guess I'll just do as the letter asks and think about it later."

Having completely cooled down, I lay down on the bed and waited for 1AM, the appointed time. I read the letter over and over so I wouldn't forget what I was waiting for. And then, as the time approached...

"...But, this won't turn into a fight, right? It's going to be okay, isn't it?", harboring these depressing thoughts, I left my room.

"Um... It was the central plaza, right?"

I walked down the pavement with heavy steps, checking the map in "Ryouko Otonashi's Memory Notebook".

The world at night. Everyone was asleep. Tonight, I was the only person walking about. I could sense not a single other human being in the area. I *did* sense the presence of things which were not human, but I should probably not think too deeply about that. To tell you the truth, the thought of just going back to my room crossed my mind several times, but leaving my memories stolen did not appeal to me, so my feet reluctantly pushed me forward.

After walking for a short while, an iron fence came into view. It was set up to completely block the road I was walking along. According to my notebook, entry to the central plaza was forbidden between 10PM and 7AM, and that's probably why this fence is here. In other words, if I can't overcome this fence, I won't be able to reach my destination. This time, I seriously thought about going back, but at the last moment made a firm resolution and started climbing the fence. A few moments later, I somehow managed to land on the lawn on the other side. I started walking around the central plaza, looking for the fountain I was told to go to.

The darkness deepened. It was probably because this area was thick with trees. The same trees that were usually brilliantly sparkling green under the light of the sun were now painting the plaza pitch black in the starless night. I walked around in darkness for a while, until suddenly my field of vision grew wider.

In front of me was a small square. In its center stood a lone street lamp, relatively illuminating its surroundings. Near the lamp, I could see the fountain I was looking for. The water coming out of it made a cute soft splashing sound. As soon as my consciousness understood I have reached my destination, my nervousness increased.

I stepped slowly toward the fountain with excessive caution, but after just a few steps I stopped in my tracks.

I could see someone standing on the other side of the fountain.

I could only see the upper half of their body peeking from the shadows of the trees, but it was pretty clear I was looking at a man's back.

"Um, excuse me...", I boldly raised my voice, but there was no answer.

...I guess I should go just a little bit closer.

Leaves rustled under my feet. Nevertheless, the man didn't make any sign he had noticed the noise. I continued stepping forward and raised my voice again.

"Um... Was it you who called me here?"

Once again, there was no answer.

He... couldn't possibly not have heard me.

My body became heavy. A growing sense of dread pushed down on both my shoulders. In no time my tightly fisted hands were covered in sweat. Nevertheless, the lure of mystery pushed me forward, and the contours of the faint figure in front of me gradually became clearer.

I saw a man wearing a suit. His hair was white and his neck covered with countless deep wrinkles.

Suddenly, a gust of wind came blowing by.

Sway, sway.

Sway, sway.

The man's figure swayed feebly in the wind.

I felt cold shivers all over my body. They felt as if someone touched the back of my neck with an icy hand. I faintly heard a different part of me yelling at me to stop inside my brain, but my feet moved on their own accord as I approached the man and looked at his face.

Our eyes met.

My eyes met the bloodshot red eyeballs bulging out of the man's wide open eyes.

His face was pale, and the dark blood-vessels on it made an eerie pattern. A tongue that looked like a rotting sea slug hanged down from his mouth, reaching the nape of his neck.

He was not standing on the ground.

He was hanging from a rope around his neck.

That rope was now swaying slowly in the wind.

It was a sight that, just by witnessing it, could snatch every bit of heat from your body -- but this is not the time to write flowery descriptions in my notebook! I should run away! This has nothing to do with me!

Drip. Drip.

Instead, my eyes dropped to the source of a strange sound. Drops fell from the man's tiptoes and gathered in a small puddle under him.

For some reason there was a notebook lying in the puddle.

The moment I saw it, I felt intense electric currents running through my brain. On the notebook's front cover, in blurry yet clear letters, was written "Ryouko Otonashi's Memory Notebook."



## **CHAPTER 6**

Before I knew what I was doing, I found myself running, scattering tears and snot all around. While I was running, I wrote my memories down in my notebook.

But, I quickly forgot why I was even running. I slowed my pace, and looked down at the unfinished memory in the notebook. When I did, that recent memory was resurrected in my brain and --

"KYAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAA!"

Screaming, I continued fervently dashing away from the central plaza. I climbed over the iron fence like a daredevil, and after running away some more I finally saw the school dormitory ahead of me. I flew into the dorms at top speed, and headed straight to Matsuda-kun's room. As far as I'm concerned, when faced with times like this, the only person I can remember -- the only person I can rely on -- is Matsuda-kun!

As I ran through the corridors, flipping through my notebook in search of Matsuda-kun's room, I recalled another memory that was written down in it.

"I am not allowed to visit Matsuda-kun in his room without a good reason"

But, I *did* have a good reason right now. It was an unprecedented state of emergency, and so I ignored the precaution. After flipping through the notebook some more, I finally remembered where Matsuda-kun's room is, and managed to reach it before I forgot again.

Bang bang bang bang bang!

As soon as I reached the door I knocked on it with all my strength and screamed.

"M...Matsuda-kun! I-i-i-i-i-it's terrible! Terrible!"

But, no matter how long I waited, the door didn't show any sign it was going to open.

"M...Matsuda-kun! C'mon, Matsuda-kuuuuuuun!!"

I continued my insistent knocking. I knocked as if I was deranged. As if I was half-crazed. I knocked and knocked, and after I continued knocking for a while, a door finally opened.

"...Honestly, who is this?"

But, the door that opened... was the door to the room next door.

-- Wait, huh?

It was strange. There was no one there. The door was open, and I even heard a person's voice, but no one was there.

"Hey, what's goin' on? You're bein' very noisy."

Someone's voice could be heard in the corridor that still looked empty. Even more surprisingly, it was a kid's voice. I looked around once more, but there was still no one there.

"Hey, big sis, where are you lookin'? I'm right here!"

"W...Where are you?", I turned to face the empty hallway and yelled. "W...Where are you hiding?!"

Once again, I could only hear a voice.

"Ha ha, I'm not hidin' anywhere! I'm right here, in front of your eyes! You just haven't noticed me yet."

In front of my eyes?

I took a big breath, and waited for my palpitations, which by now became violent, to calm down. Then, I properly concentrated on the environment. When I did, I finally noticed him.

"Oh, did you finally notice me?"

In front of my eyes stood a boy that looked like a cartoon cupid.

"Ah, don't worry. I was born with a weak sense of presence. No one notices me at first. I'm used to it by now, so don't let it bother you."

The boy had the clean voice of someone yet to reach puberty. His face was surprisingly featureless. It was the kind of face that you'd draw if told to draw a child's face without using a photo as reference. Its complete lack of distinguishing features was an astounding distinguishing feature all by itself.

"So, what's wrong?"

".....Eh? What's wrong about what?"

"Hey, hey. When you're assaultin' someone's door in the middle of the night, you can't go asking 'about what?'. At this time of night, even insomniacs doze off!"

He held a paper bag crammed with sweet pastries in his hand, fit for the unending appetite of someone still in his growth period. A logo reading "Hansel & Gretel" was printed on it. It must be the bakery's name. He took a pastry out of the bag, crammed it in his mouth, and said,

"Fwehh, fwah's whron?"

"...Eh? Can you repeat that?"

The boy swallowed the pastry he's been chewing, and repeated, "Well, what's wrong? How 'bout you tell me about it? I may be able to help."

As he spoke these powerful words, the boy looked me over as if appraising me. His eyes especially lingered on my chest and my legs.

"Um, before that I have one question of my own... what is such a young boy doing here? Are you visiting your brother or your sister here at the scho--"

"My name is Yuuta Kamishiro, and I'm a student in Hope's Peak Academy's 77th class. Pleased to meet 'ya."

".....Huh?"

"I may not look like one, but I am a high-school student."

Oh, my!

"Don't worry, I already have hair growing in all the right places!"

Oh, oh my!

"...Don't just stand there forever with that surprised look on your face! I introduced myself, so can you at least tell me your name, big sis?"

"S...Sure, um..."

I spread my notebook's front page in front of the boy's eyes.

"Huh. That's a strange way to introduce oneself", opined the boy from the other side of the notebook. "Hmm, Ryouko Otonashi-chan... Not a bad name, if I may say so myself. If I were you I would look forward for chances to introduce myself."

He smiled an innocent smile. When all is said and done, I couldn't see anything but an elementary school student.

"Well, then."

Suddenly, his expression matured.

"So, what kind of trouble have you gotten yourself involved in?"

His eyes glittered with curiosity. No, they *glared*. And it wasn't just curiosity. They radiated something much more greedy, much more calculating, much more insane.

"Your state of confusion means it's a fairly major trouble, isn't it?"

Staring at me with eyes filled with enthusiasm that didn't fit the rest of his youthful features, he thrust his hand into the paper bag once again, and chose another pastry.

"Yay! Ebisu pumpkin melon-pan!"

His face was covered with an innocent wide grin once again as he happily pushed the new pastry into his mouth.

"Well, so what is it? What kind of trouble?"

"Um... I wouldn't call it 'trouble', exactly... It's just that... I have something to discuss with Matsuda-kun who lives in this room over here..."

"Fhees fhot fwhom"

"Um, I didn't quite get that..."

Kamishiro-kun gulped the pastry down. "Yasuke Matsuda isn't home right now."

"...Isn't home?"

"Yep, he isn't home."

"Whaaaaaaaaaaaaaat?!"

My sudden scream reverberated through the dorm's empty corridor.

"That's bad! Bad, bad! Why isn't he home when such important things are going on?!"

"You may yell, but that still wouldn't make him be home."

I was in a panic, but Kamishiro-kun just calmly continued chewing on his pastry.

"His neuroticism is very well known among his classmates in the 77th class. There's no way he wouldn't notice someone knocking that hard on his door. I could even hear it from next door, enough to make me come out to see what was going on."

"B...But, why isn't he home? Where is he?"

"Maybe he's still in his lab? He's always working late into the night."

"Got it! His lab!", I turned around and started to run...

"Hey, wait!"

...But, Kamishiro-kun stopped me.

"Don't tell me you plan to go there? Did you forget? At this time of night, the east quarter is blocked with an iron fence and security sensors. I don't think you can enter."

"...Eh? I can't?"

...In other words, I can't get Matsuda-kun to save me?

"That... can't be...", I was at my wits' end. "That's bad... What am I going to do? This is the biggest crisis in my entire personal history..."

"Why don't you let me help you, then?", Kamishiro-kun faced me, his face brimming. "I can't leave a troubled woman with such a cute face as yours alone! So, what have you gotten yourself involved with? Tell me everything."

What have I gotten myself into? That's --

"...Huh?"

I mean, that's --

"Um... What was that?"

It seems that while I was at my wits' end, I've forgotten what I was at my wits' end for.

"Um... Wait just one moment.", I hurried up and checked my notebook.

"Ha ha ha. You really don't have to hide anything. If you weren't in great trouble, you wouldn't be smashing that door like you did. You acted just like Kindaichi in the manga when he comes across a dead body!"

Coming across a dead body... just about the same time Kamishiro-kun said those words, I found the same phrase in my notebook. In a second, my spirit was crushed and suffocated, and I stopped breathing.

"Hey, what's wrong? Your face is as white as if you're in an episode of *Kaiki Daisakusen*."

I was still in shock from my resurrected memory of finding a body, and couldn't breath. In order to escape from being suffocated I whispered one sentence to myself -- *This has nothing to do with me*. I repeated it again and again.

"Nothing to do with me... nothing to do with me... nothing to do with me..."

For me, they were magical words.

Each time I whispered them, the world slowed down a little. Truly magical words.

"That's right... nothing to do with me..."

After repeating the magic words a few more times, I finally managed to calm down. I was just about to close my notebook so I could really forget once and for all what had happened, when my eyes discovered the next memory written in it.

"There was a Ryouko Otonashi Memory Notebook lying on the ground under the body"

I raised my voice in a scream like I never had before.

"AAAAAAAAAAAAAAH! I FORGOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOT!"

That notebook, inside that muddy pool! Even if I convince myself this has nothing to do with me, if they find a notebook with my name on it, it would be impossible to convince anyone else! I'm going to be pulled into a stage, surrounded by extras. They're going to expose me in front of a faceless audience and hand me down some cruel punishment! This is bad! My palpitations became violent again.

"W-W-W-W-W-What should I do?"

Everything was breaking down. The world itself was breaking down, starting at my feet. I have to do something about that notebook before it completely collapses!

Spurred by that sense of urgency, I took off at full speed.

"Hey, big sis! Wait!", a voice called from behind my back. "If you're in trouble please let me help!"

"If you want to help, tell Matsuda-kun to look for me when he comes back! Bye-bye!", I yelled without looking back. Then, I ran past the corridor and out of the dorms.

I ran all the way through the south quarter without stopping to catch my breath, and climbed over the iron fence with that same momentum. I proceeded at full speed into the central plaza, still covered by darkness. I ran so fast I didn't even notice my breath was running out. Finally, I reached the fountain once more. I reached it, but-

".....Huh?"

The scene that spread in front of my eyes... was discomfoting.

I looked around several times. Yep, this sure is discomfoting.

I opened my notebook to check my memories again. The one thing I can't trust is my own brain, so when faced with such a discomfoting scene, my first thought is to doubt myself, but...

"I came across an old man's dead body near the fountain in the central plaza"

That memory, properly written down in the notebook, convinced me it was not me who was at fault. No, the cause of this discomfoting feeling was the scene in front of my eyes.

The scene that was lacking a dead body.

It was strange to find a body here, and now it's strange not to find one. Strangeness upon strangeness -- it was unbelievably strange.

*Was he really alive?  
Did the dead body walk away?*

I didn't understand what was going on, so I looked around some more. Soon, I found something near the root of a nearby tree. It was a notebook. On its front page was written, "Ryouko Otonashi's Memory Notebook".

*Wait, huh? Why is my notebook here?*

Then, as I considered that question and was about to go and pick the notebook up...

"TA-TA-RA-TA-TAAAAAAA!"

I turned around, my body shivering. There was a girl standing behind me.

"Heh heh heh, so we've finally reached this event scene!"

She was striking a pose, her arms folded in front of her body. A girl about my age.

She had flashy makeup on, as if she just jumped straight out of the pages of a fashion magazine. Her blond hair bulged in large, soft puffs. Her stylishly torn top had a stupidly large cleavage, and her embarrassingly short skirt revealed long, slender, white legs.

On first look, she seemed like a normal cute girl. Her eyes alone were a million light years divorced from "normal". Those deep dark eyes were like a bottomless swamp, and it almost seemed even the darkness of the night could easily be swallowed inside them.

The moment I saw those eyes, danger signals started flashing violently inside my brain. Every fiber in my body screamed at me to run away, but at the same time I was captured by the despair-inducing idea that resistance was futile. In the end, I just stood there, transfixed, unable to move.

"...Oh? Why are you ignoring me? Or maybe your default mode is being one of those mute characters?"

She had a smile on her face, but it was the wicked smile of a warrior looking down on a foolish weakling before they crush them.

"Ah! I got it!" - she suddenly raised her voice, and thrust her index finger straight at my forehead. "I know what you're thinking! I know what you've been thinking ever since you saw me with my arms crossed! You've been thinking, 'You know, I haven't crossed my arms in quite a while! It must be my voluptuous bosom that's keeping me from it!' How rude! Women who boast their boobs like that are the worst! By the way, did you know the current world obsession with boobs is nothing more than an illusion born out of no-good games and anime and variety shows? Ah, it's so gross! Totally gross! Do you even know what kind of guys are obsessed with boobs? I'll tell you! You know those airheaded girls who get pampered in their hometowns and then go out to the big city where they're not popular anymore so they end up taking off their clothes for anyone who gives them the time of day? There are those virgin guys obsessed with that kind of girl who are also not the brightest bulbs in the shed and only have their impressive lower bodies going on for them! They are the ones endlessly obsessed with boobs!"

Changing the subject for a second, aren't virgins the worst? If it wasn't for the Virgin megastores there would be nothing good about them at all! Even then, that chain got shut down by the economy... and yet, it's still a million times better than actual virgins! .....Um, what was I talking about? Oh, that's right, the economy! We should start with the government policy --"

"Hey, wait a sec -- ouch!"

She was obviously saying far too much for someone making her first appearance, so I tried to stop her, but she just pushed her finger even deeper into my forehead, making my efforts ineffective.

"Wait, now I remember! We were talking about boob obsession! Y'know, I hate being pushy, but you should really drop that boob obsession of yours. *Dropchez cet Obsession*, if you prefer *en Français*. If you don't drop it, you're going to get in trouble when you're older. Do you get it? The larger they are the more they sag. Or maybe you're one of *them*? Do you think you can win against the forces of gravity? Do you have superpowers? Should I expect Magneto to come scouting for you?"

"I said, wait a sec -- fugah!"

I tried being insistent, but this time she thrust her fingers straight into my mouth, making my efforts ineffective once more.

"*Firenzio por favor!*...Wait, that's not it. What was it that you say when you want someone to be quiet? Oh, whatever. In any case, shut up and don't interfere. I really love talking, you see. You should act like a good mute girl and just stay silent. It's my turn now!"

"Fugu... Hafuhefu..."

"Ha ha! I don't understand what you're saying at all!"

Saliva started flowing out of my mouth, running through her finger and dropping in a thin thread into the ground.

She didn't seem to mind at all, though, and instead said, "By the way, what's your name, mute girl?"

"Fugahohe... Fuga --"

"Hey, hey", she tilted her head, looking displeased. "Don't mumble. Say your name properly. If you don't answer within 3 seconds, I'm going to follow the 3 second rule and pull your tongue out."

She wasn't even done talking before she grabbed my tongue with her fingers. She had tremendous strength, and my tongue was held firmly in place as if gripped with a vice.

"Right! One! --"

She started the countdown -- wait, this isn't a joke?! Every pore in my body suddenly opened, making me sweat profusely.

-- Wait, if my tongue is held down I can't speak!

"Two! --"

Suddenly, I noticed the notebook I held in my hand. I pushed it out in front of her eyes with great excitement.

"Hmmm? Ryouko Otonashi, is it? But, I'm very sorry!", she opened her mouth widely and flashed a demonic smile at me. "I told you to *say* your name, I never said anything about *showing* it to me!"

".....Hegah?!"

"Right, then. Your three seconds are over, so I'll be taking your tongue now!"

"Ha..... Hagaaaaafuguuuuuuu!!"

I tried resisting with every bit of strength left in my body, but her nails cruelly wedged into my tongue. Inside my mouth, the irony taste of blood mixed with that of my saliva, and rapidly drained away my fighting spirit. Her eyes, transfixed on mine, were overflowing with dark despair that seemed to squeeze what hope I had left straight out of me. At that moment, I finally came to accept that resistance was useless.



The last of my strength left my body, and my notebook slipped away from my hand. I let my body hang, and abandoned hope.

".....Heh"

Suddenly, I heard a laughing voice.

"Heh... Aha... Ahahaha!". With an ecstatic expression on her face, her cheeks painted red, she laughed a bizarre, mad, overwhelming laugh.

"AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAHAHA!"

When that merciless, savage roar of laughter came to a stop, she finally removed her fingers from my mouth.

"Cough, cough! Cough!"

I coughed madly, spit mixed with blood spewing out of my mouth.

"Ha ha! *LOL*! Super-awesome! By the way, who'd ever want your tongue, anyway? What do you think I am, some kind of savage?"

"...Cough cough cough!"

"I bet you're wondering why I'd do such an odd thing, don't you? Well, to answer simply, I really wanted to see your face full of despair. Y'see, for me, this is the best kind of introduction you can give!"

I was still leaning forward, gasping for breath. She wiped her saliva-drenched hands on my back, and continued talking.

"By the way, I haven't introduced myself yet, have I?"

I became even more nervous. I had a bad feeling about this. A very bad feeling. My intuition was telling me to stay far away from this girl. But, she didn't stop. Instead, she proudly announced her name.

"My name is Laputa Tenkujo!"

"Laputa... Tenkuj --"

"Just kidding! It's a joke, you see, a joke!"

Is this really the time for jokes?

"Ah! I know what you're thinking. You're thinking, 'is this really the time for jokes?', aren't you?"

It was like she could read my mind.

"Jokes are amazing, aren't they? It was Hirobumi Itou who said, 'only a man who has a sense of humor can live in this world without growing mad', you know. No, that was a lie. Hirobumi-chan never said that!"

I couldn't think how to reply to that. Instead, I just waited for her to *finally* tell me her name. For real, this time.

"My name is Junko Enoshima. Under the guise of "Super High-school Level Fashion Girl", I'm sometimes a charismatic amateur model for fashion magazines. At other times, I'm a charismatic -- oh, oh, oh, but that's still a secret! I'm sorry!"

She stood in the light of the street lamp, stretching her figure like an actress under the spotlight.

Junko Enoshima.

My brain understood that I shouldn't get involved with her, but my body acted on its own. Before I knew it, I picked up my notebook and wrote her name in it.

".....Oh? And what's that you're doing?", Enoshima-san asked with a curious look on her face.

"Ah, um... That's...", I hesitated, not sure what I should say.

"Oh, c'mon! Don't tell me you're going to turn into mute-girl again and keep it a secret?!". She puffed her cheeks as if she was a little girl trying to show her dissatisfaction. I couldn't help but admire how effortlessly her face moved from one expression to the next.

"Mute characters have grown out of fashion, you know? Besides, conversation is an excellent communication tool for us humans, so not using it is kind of a waste, don't you think?"

"T...This isn't a conversion! You've just been spouting nonsense ever since --"

"You should address me by my proper name. Haven't I just introduced myself?", she chided me in a flat, threatening tone.

"Um... Enoshima-san, everything you're saying is just nonse --"

"I don't need the -san. I hate that kind of reserved politeness".

"But, I just met you a few minutes ago..."

"Which makes us complete strangers? Ha ha, you're totally wrong! I mean, we're penpals, aren't we?!"

"...Penpals?"

"You've read my letter, didn't you? Isn't that why you're here?"

A letter? What letter is she talking about? I quickly checked my notebook, and soon remembered. And then, as soon as I did, I raised my voice in surprise.

"Eh? So, it was you who --?!"

"Yep! I'm the beautiful kidnapper who took your memories hostage, ha ha!"

Without showing any signs of embarrassment, but also not of putting on air, she ended her sentence with strange little laugh.

"B...But, why...?"

"Hey, you can't just keep asking questions! Think for yourself!"

"U...Um, so I guess you really wanted to keep me and Matsuda-kun..."

"That has nothing to do with it!"

Even though I did my best to think of a reason, she rejected it in one swift threatening motion.

"Well, whatever. I just don't feel like telling you yet!". As she was speaking, Enoshima-san picked up the notebook that was still lying on the ground under a tree, ignored the liquid it was soaked in and shoved it into her cleavage.

"Heh heh heh. I'm sorry but I can't return that to you yet. This event scene can't proceed that far hey hey hey hey hey hey hey" - Enoshima-san suddenly opened her eyes wide in surprise. "Huh? Huh? Huh? Huh? Huh?", she turned her head from side to side, calling out as if she was mad. "It's gone. Gone. Gone. Gone. Gone. Gone!"

"W...What's gone?", I asked timidly, confused by her sudden change.

"It's gone! Gone! Isn't that strange? Why is it gone? Why?!", she paced around the circumference of the trees, repeating her cries like a broken record.

"I asked, what's gone?!", I finally decided to use a stronger tone, and then --

"Oh? Ah...".

She finally turned her face back toward me... but it was an unexpected expressionless face. Then, she replied in a voice lacking any intonation, speaking as lightly as if she was discussing trivialities.

"The body. The body is gone. The body that was here isn't here anymore."

"Huh?"

"Oh, have you forgotten already? Honestly, even forgetfulness should have its limits. You saw that body yourself, didn't you?"

A new question came into my head. "...Wait, how did you know I'm forgetful? Have I told you?"

"T...That doesn't matter! Anyway, there was definitely a body here before!", Enoshima-san raised her voice, brushing my question aside. "Please, believe me! There was a body here minutes ago! I killed him, so I'm sure of it!"

".....Huh?"

Before I knew it, my body stiffened.

"You see, I came at him from behind and hanged him in one go! I did it with those very slender arms! Then, he leaked a little. Honestly, old men like him should wear diapers, just in case. If they did, it would give me peace of mind even in days like this!"

"Huh?"

I felt as if a spell of confusion was cast on me. Enoshima-san, on the other hand, went on, gesticulating enthusiastically as she spoke.

"Tee-hee. To be frank, some of it got on my skirt, so I went to the bathroom to wash it off. But it seems in the time I was gone the body took off! It slipped away! Well, it's my fault, really, getting scared from a little pee like that. That's why, as punishment, I put that pee-drenched notebook under my shirt just now!"

"Huh?"

"I mean, I worked so hard so I could make an example out of him... Honestly, who could have done that?!"

"Huh?"

"Hey, you've been doing that for a while now. Are you trying to be one of those absent-minded characters that are always so popular?"

"Huh?"

"Or maybe you're just a dummy?"

It was useless.

Thoughts I couldn't even form into words ran around inside my head, causing a terrible, grating headache. I didn't understand a thing. Is killing a person a thing someone can confess so readily?

"Ah, are you wondering how come I've confessed such a thing to you so readily?", she hit the bullseye once more. "That should be obvious! I want you involved in this!"

".....Eh?"

A vague yet extraordinary anxiety unfolded over my entire body.

"M...Me, involved in this...? W...Wait a second! Why do I have to get involved in such a horrible thing!"

"Huh?"

"I'm asking... why do I have to get involved in such a horrible thing?!"

"Huh?"

"I...I said --"

"Don't get so mad! You're ruining your absent-minded character personality!"

"That's not it! I --"

"In that case, let *me* ask *you* a question. Say you're making instant ramen. You put boiling water in and then wait 3 minutes, right? But if someone comes and asks you 'how come it's 3 minutes?', what's going to be your answer? You can't answer that, can you?"

My thoughts reached a state of unprecedented turmoil.

"W...What are you talking about?! Don't change the --"

"I'm not changing the subject! It's just the same!", Enoshima-san counterattacked with a strong tone of voice. "That's just how things are, so that's why I'm doing it! There's no further explanation! Ah, but, y'know, I'm not proud of it but I am an impatient person, so I often give up before the three minutes are up. People think I have a thing for hard noodles, but it's actually because of this muuuuch deeper reason! Well, do you get it now?"

My cognition clattered and collapsed, and the inside of my brain completely turned into rubble. All that was left was a large number of question marks.

I don't understand anything. That was the one and only answer I was certain of.

Attempting to understand other people perfectly is a futile activity unless you're aiming for the *Urbarmensch* olympics. I know that. But, nevertheless, her case was extraordinary. I shouldn't have gotten involved with her from the very beginning, after all. But, it's probably not too late yet! Before I get even more involved --

That's right, I should run away!

That's right, I should run away!

Having finally arrived at this simple answer, I promptly turned the other way, kicked powerfully at the ground, and set off dashing away from danger.

Almost immediately, I found myself colliding head-on with Enoshima-san.

"How -- ?!"

I fell down right on my butt. It hit the ground so harshly that my entire body turned numb. When I looked up, Enoshima-san stood on the road, blocking my head. I never even saw her move, and yet she somehow appeared behind me before I even started running.

"T...Teleportation?!"

"I prefer 'shukuchi-jutsu'. I like the pop-culture vibe."

I felt like it wasn't just my butt that hit the ground, but rather my anything and everything. It seemed I couldn't escape her after all. I may have convinced myself I have nothing to do with it, but she will not allow that.

"I think you misunderstand the situation, don't you agree?" Enoshima-san crouched down and peered into my exhausted eyes.

Alarms went off everywhere inside my head -- I mustn't look into her eyes. Nevertheless, I couldn't avert my gaze. "I should've let you know ahead. Your intentions are irrelevant. What's relevant is Junko Enoshima's purposes. That is all. That's why even thinking about escaping from Junko Enoshima is nonsense. The world itself is Junko Enoshima's playground, and everyone in it is merely living in it on borrowed time. I'm not talking 'everything you own is mine' -- I'm talking, 'you yourself are mine'. The entire world and all mankind are for Junko Enoshima to do with as she pleases."

-- *What?*

It was the most evil, extraordinary, egotistical doctrine. The kind that causes you to feel sick. If she really means all that, I have to resent my own lack of luck for meeting that girl.

"Oh, well. We should return to what we were talking about. The issue of the dead body." She stood up, recollecting herself, turned to face me and asked a question. "By the way, do you know what Hope's Peak Academy's Steering Committee is?"

"...Hope's Peak Academy's Steering Committee?" Just to make sure, I checked my notebook, but I couldn't find mention of that phrase anywhere. It seems I honestly do not know what that is. But, if she mentions that name right now, that probably means --

"Ah, it seems you breached a conclusion! Ah, sorry. I keep messing up my pronunciation. Let me try again. It seems you've reached a conclusion!"

Enoshima-san spread both her hands grandiosely, as if she was the master-of-ceremonies of an extravagant show.

"Bin-bingo! That's right! The dead body that was supposed to be here was a member of Hope's Peak Academy's Steering Committee. These guys are much higher ranked than the teaching staff and even the headmaster. That is, they're the geezers who hold the real power in this school. Hee hee hee, aren't you excited already?" Growing excited all by herself, she continued. "But, there's no need to grieve. I mean, him getting killed here is just the way things are meant to be. Yep, it was set up since the very beginning. That's why no matter how much they try to hide *that* incident, it's all useless!"

".....*That* incident?" I asked without thinking. It was a momentary response I can only call thoughtless. The moment it came out of my mouth, I was bewildered by the fact I even asked it.

"Oh? Oh? Oh? Curious, are you? Of course you are - one can only listen to such a vague name like '*that* incident' so many times before curiosity takes over, don't you agree?" Saying that, Enoshima-san struck a pose, her hands on both sides of her waist and her chest puffed high, and declared loudly, "The Worst, Largest Incident in Hope's Peak Academy's History! That is the true identity of *that* incident I was talking about!"

The moment I heard those words I was assaulted by a sensation as if some kind of strange fever invaded the inside of my skull. What --? My consciousness went number and number with the scorching heat. At the same time, I absentmindedly wrote those words in my notebook, as if someone was manipulating my hand. "The Worst, Largest Incident in Hope's Peak Academy's History".

"Yep, write down everything you hear. That's a good girl," Enoshima-san laughed in satisfaction when she saw me do so. "Y'know, you'd make an excellent part-time worker. There's no manager out there who doesn't tell new workers on their first day to write down everything they're taught. But, if someone tried to order me to do something like that, I'd send them straight to hell. I'm not kidding -- straight to hell. First, I'd finish off their family, then their friends and acquaintances, and then, when they're fully immersed in despair, I'll wait until they come ask me themselves to please kill them... By the way, who are *you*?"

"Eh?" I looked up from my notebook in surprise, and saw that the scowl in her eyes increased considerably. Her scathing eyes were looking towards something far behind my back. I turned over at once, but could see nothing but deep black trees in the middle of the night's darkness.

Nevertheless, Enoshima-san faced the darkness and asked again in a sullen voice, "Hey, I asked you who you are."

Suddenly, I saw something moving from the corner of my eyes. Then, something swayed up slowly from behind the dense foliage.

"Eh?"

A white mask appeared inside the jet-black scenery. It was a human face. Its whiteness was as pure as if it was covered in white paint.

"Sigh, I guess I've been found out."

Along with the voice, a man's silhouette became apparent within the darkness. He had a long, slender body, much like a snake stretching upwards. He wore a pitch-black school uniform, and had pitch-black hair dropping down to his shoulders. Black upon black. The white face peeking from the blackness had small, thin, lizard-like eyes carved into it.

"My name... is Isshiki Madarai." I could hardly see his mouth move.

"Is that so? It's not like it really matters, but... that's such a lame name! 'Junko Enoshima' is ten billion times cooler!"

I took a sidelong glance at Enoshima-san, being her usual loud self behind me. She didn't seem much affected by the situation, and flashed her regular overconfident smile.

"That is, indeed, troubling. I have much pride in my name... By the way, that is not the only thing troubling me at present."

"Huh. I wonder what else there could be?"

"I was hoping to talk to you when you're alone, but... well... If it's come to this, I guess I have no choice."

Madarai took something out of his pocket while he was murmuring. It looked like a photo. He moved his lizard-like eyes back and forth between us and the photo. "...I see. So you're Junko Enoshima."

"And what is your business with Junko Enoshima?" she answered without even blinking.

"I have heard a certain rumor."

"Was it about how Junko Enoshima is transcendently, hopelessly beautiful?"

"There's that, I guess, but..." Madarai paused for a second, and then continued in a completely different tone of voice. "I also heard that Junko Enoshima was involved in *that* incident."

"And that's what you want to talk about? Ha ha, I'm sorry, that's impossible!" Enoshima-san wasn't even slightly unnerved, nor did she lose her smile. "That's not something a small fry like you has any right to talk about. Know your place!"

"...I thought you'd say that. Well, I guess I won't get what I want that easily."

"And what are you gonna do about it? Are you going to force it out violently? Are you an old-fashioned kind of guy? That kind of trite development should stay inside V-Cinema films!"

"...Speaking of being old-fashioned, I am not the type who'd go easy on you just because you're a woman. I hope that's not what you're counting on." Madarai's coercive glare shot through us.

Enoshima-san and Madarai glared at each other in a way that almost made the ground itself shake..... But this has nothing to do with me, does it? This is an issue between that boy who called himself Isshiki Madarai and that girl who called herself Junko Enoshima -- I'm not involved at all, so it's okay for my body to stop shaking with fear now, right?

"Well, then. I hope you two are ready, because --"

"W...Wait a second!" I raised my shaky voice. Both Enoshima-san and Madarai turned their eyes towards me at the same time. "Ah. U...Um, it's strange that you said 'you two' just now. After all, you only have business with --"

"I can't have one of you running away. Anyone involved with Junko Enoshima is likely to have something to do with the incident themselves," said Madarai, licking his lips. "Well, if you need someone to blame, blame yourself for getting involved with Junko Enoshima. Furthermore, I've been hearing nothing but complaints, but don't you think this is a pain for me too? I came prepared for one and now I have to deal with two. That's twice the labour. But, you don't see *me* complaining, so why don't you just keep it to yourself?"

"W...What...?" That was some messed-up reasoning. No, it wasn't even close to being reasoning at all. It was just overwhelmingly egotistical. But... I guess still not as egotistical as *she* was.

"Hmmm. I see, I see. You're brimming with deadly motivation, are you? But, y'see... this girl here is *overflowing* with deadliness!" said Enoshima-san, stroking my head.

-- *Wait, what girl is she talking about?!*

"Hey, don't look so stupified! I'm leaving the rest to you!"

-- *Huh? Leaving the rest of what to who?*

"Ah! Your face looks just like a fur seal's! ...But that doesn't matter now - go ahead and fight him already! That's your role here, y'know."

-- *M...Me, fighting...?!*

"W-W-W-W-What are you talking about?!" I screamed, brushing her hand off the top of my head.

"Oh, it's fine. You're a girl who can do anything when you want to. You can even kill when you want to, y'know."

"Hey. Enough with that kind of talk. 'Killing'... That's not a word fit for healthy high-school girls.", Madarai's face became distorted with a sarcastic smile.

"Oh? Not a fan of mutual killing?" Enoshima-san scoffed. "Huh. You're not prepared at all! I'm a little disappointed."

"...That's just natural. What use are you to me dead? There are many things I seek answers to, after all. At the very least, I have to keep your mouths working." Madarai narrowed his lizard eyes even more, and repeated, emphasizing his words. "But *just* the mouths." Then, his slender body swayed like the flame of a candle, and started moving slowly towards us.

"Hm. I guess he really is eager."

"Of course I am. I've been waiting for this chance ever since the incident." Madarai pushed out a tightly gripped fist in front of his chest. It was rugged like a turban snail and didn't match his snake-like body at all. Should someone be hit with that fist, their face would probably cave in, just like in comic books.

"W-W-W-W-What are we going to do...?" Tears started streaming from my eyes.

"I guess we have no choice after all," Enoshima-san whispered in a low, stiff tone. Then, she suddenly changed back to her regular clear, cheerful voice. "Go ahead!"

"W... W-W-W-W-W-WAIIIIIIIIIIIT!"

"Ahahaha! Don't worry! You're going to be just fine!" Enoshima-san gripped my shoulders like a bully would. "I'm going to help you, of course. We'll have you display the full extent of your talent in no time!"

Huh? Talent? *My* talent?

"Hey, hey - when you're in trouble, look in your notebook, remember?"

"Ah, yeah..." I turned my eyes down to my notebook following Enoshima-san's urges, and then --

SMASH!

FWOOOOSH! CRACK!

WHOOOP! SWISH! TATATATATA!

Sound effects that should belong in a cartoon reverberated through the area. I looked back up in a conditioned reflex, and --

".....Eh?"

Enoshima-san, who was just behind me a second ago, was now a few meters ahead, exchanging violent blows in a fierce battle with Madarai.

FWASH! ZUBABA! DODODODO!

Madarai used his long limbs like whips as he attacked. His opponent, fashion girl Enoshima-san, was standing her ground. Where the heck did this fighting action come from?!

"Hey! Don't just stand there looking like a pig in shock!" Enoshima-san yelled at me while performing magnificent tripping techniques as if she was a professional gymnast. "Write everything down in your notebook!" Right then, she delivered a perfect kick, sending Madarai down into the lawn with a short grunt. Nevertheless, he turned his long body like a spinning top, and recovered from his fall still spinning, as if he was breakdancing.

"Whoops!" Enoshima-san jumped and dodged, and Madarai took advantage of the opening to rise back up. Then, without waiting a single second he delivered a straight right. He was clearly too far away for the strike to hit, but his bizarre long arms seemed to ignore the distance. Nevertheless, Enoshima-san dodged his flying fist, and in the same movement stepped up and thrust the tip of her right foot into his abdomen.

"Gufuu -- !" A groan left Madarai's mouth. The two finally stopped moving.

"Oh, it worked! The Crescent Moon Kick. I wanted to try it ever since I read about it in a magazine." Enoshima-san didn't pursue the crouched Madarai, and instead boasted while grinning broadly.

By the way, what even caused this school battle to begin? Am I just forgetting again, or was it really just completely incoherent --

"Hey, I told you not to just stand there looking bewildered!" I was still frozen in place, and Enoshima-san's irritated voice washed over me. "Write everything down in your notebook! What do you think I'm working so hard for --"

Suddenly, her face flew away. A high-kick as swift as a whip came at her from behind, sending her thin body flying like a scrap of paper.

"Ah!" I raised my voice instinctively, and turned my eyes to where her body was headed.

".....Sigh, that was almost dangerous." She was posed on her knees, but then stood up as if nothing had happened. There was no visible damage except for a red mark on her left arm. It seemed she tried to use that arm to guard against Madarai's kick. I wasn't the only one who thought such a blow should've broken her thin arms, though - I could see signs of impatience on Madarai's scowling face.

"Ha! Nervous 'cause I'm too strong? Starting to doubt yourself? That's right! I'm the ultimate weapon fashion-girl who hasn't lost in over 300 fights!"

"Shut up." Brushing away her words in anger, Madarai rushed at her once more. Soon, the battle resumed in full force. They both used their right hands, right feet, left hands, left feet, and then their full bodies in a hectic exchange of blows. I simply stood watching, unable to move. Only my hand moved, to write everything down earnestly in my notebook.

Enoshima-san let out a series of exaggerated high-kicks, as though in response to the one that sent her flying before, but Madarai just twisted his mouth into a grin. He carefully avoided the kicks, and then, with perfect timing, lowered his posture and sprang into a tackle. His long hands stretched forward, and were trying to take hold of Enoshima-san's waist, but --

Enoshima-san's knee sprung up aiming directly for Madarai's jaw.

"Ku...!"

Madarai managed to turn away from his tackling target at the last second, and avoided Enoshima-san's knee by mere millimeters. Nevertheless, he lost his balance and thrust his right hand towards the ground. As soon as he did, Enoshima-san cried, "Hi-yaaaaa!" in a silly voice and delivered a spinning kick at the right half of his body, which had become an open target. Madarai guarded with his left hand in panic -- but he didn't make it in time. His right temple was hit with Enoshima-san's intense kick. His slender body flew down towards the ground, swaying back and forth.

"Ah, that was an easy win! Easier than goin' dancing!" Enoshima-san laughed loudly. "I guess he was all boastful without much to show for it. He should try going back and relearning the basics -- that was really no trouble at all!" She continued to cackle, and then took out a hand mirror from an inside pocket and started resetting her messy hair. Surprisingly, despite the fierce battle she just participated in, she wasn't even out of breath.

I rushed over to her side, and started cheering. "T...Thank god! Thank god! For a second there I was really worried!"

Enoshima-san's expression changed in an instant. "Huh?" She gave me the ultimate despising look. "...I think you're misunderstanding the situation. You don't think this is settled yet, do you? I mean, that would be an armageddon-level misunderstanding!"

"Eh...?"

Suddenly, I caught a shape slowly rising up from the corner of my eye. It was Madarai.

"H...How?"

"It's obvious, isn't it? That kind of kick shouldn't have sent him flying as grandiosely as he did. He did just what I did before - he let himself fly. Y'know, in order to reduce damage. Well, it's all because I went a little easy on him, you know -- he wouldn't have survived otherwise."

I heard the unpleasant sound of grinding metal. It came from Madarai's teeth, which were grinding together so much it almost seemed sparks were going to come out of them.



"H...He's mad, isn't he...? I...I think he's mad..."

My face was fixed on Madarai as I turned my nervous voice towards Enoshima-san, who stood hidden behind me.

"It's fine. It's impossible for someone like you to be taken down by someone on his level... Probably."

"At least be definitive about it!", I was just about to turn and face her when --

"Never take your eyes off", Enoshima-san commanded with a sharp voice. "Never take your eyes off the prey. That's the basics of the basics."

"P...Prey...?"

But, I'm the one who's the prey here, aren't I? Madarai kept grinding his teeth, advancing slowly towards us. I was shaking in fear like a frightened rabbit in front of a bloodthirsty poisonous serpent. There was nothing I could do but turn to rely on Enoshima-san once more --

"What?" Madarai suddenly opened his eyes wide in surprise. "W...When did she --?"

When did she... what? A bad feeling came over my entire body, and I turned around in fear to look behind me.

"....."

Um, what was it she called that? I went over my notebook, and soon remembered. Right, right.

"...Shukuchi-jutsu, huh."

There was no one behind me anymore. In no time at all, no sign that Enoshima-san was ever there remained.

"It seems you've been abandoned..." I heard a man's voice from behind me. I turned around once more. Madarai was suddenly standing right before of my eyes, looking down at me with vicious eyes. "But, there is no need to resent anyone. I shall settle things properly with her later. It is just the order that changed."

Having been handed what sounded like a death sentence, I came to realise the fundamental error that occupied my thoughts until that moment. I was an idiot for thinking I could rely on Enoshima-san. But, this is no time for complaints! I have to do something!

Then, as my faltering eyes turned down to my notebook, I heard Madarai's voice from above.

"...Huh. You must be really confident if you're reading a notebook at a time like this."

"U...Um, excuse me..." I couldn't even bring my head up again. I couldn't even grasp the content of what I was reading, but I still flipped through the pages. I couldn't find a breakthrough solution to my problems, but I did my best to come up with an excuse to give me some time.

"W...Wait one second... You said you were investigating The Worst, Largest Incident in Hope's Peak Academy's History, didn't you? I...In that case I won't be much help to you at all. I mean, I know absolutely nothing about that --"

"How did you know *that*, then?" Madarai's voice turned to ice and made me shiver even more.

"K...Know what?"

"All I said before was that I was looking into '*that* incident'. Nevertheless, you seem to know I was talking about The Worst, Largest Incident in Hope's Peak Academy's History." I looked up. The sharpness in Madarai's eyes seemed to grow tenfold. My first thought was to escape those eyes, so I looked down at my notebook again.

"U...Um, you see, that's... I... I just heard that name recently by accident. Yes... that's definitely what happened..."

"There are not many people in this academy who even know about that incident or its title. The fact that you two spoke about it... it seems my suspicions were exactly right."

I didn't need to even look anymore. I could imagine Madarai's lizard eyes twisting towards me in laughter. Shivers went down my spine. My arms and legs stiffened. I couldn't move at all.

-- *It's over.*

I can't be sure about it, but this is probably the first time in my life I was conscious of my own mortality. Of course, at times like this there's just one thing that comes to my empty head.

-- *Matsuda-kun.*

Yes, my beloved Matsuda-kun. But, of course, the memories don't come flashing inside my head like a revolving lantern. All I can remember is my feelings towards him. Therefore, I whispered his name again and again inside my heart. I had to remember...

Matsuda-kun Matsuda-kun Matsuda-kun Matsuda-kun Matsuda-kun Matsuda-kun Matsuda-kun Matsuda-kun...

-- *Huh?*

Um, let's try that again.

Matsuda-kun Matsuda-kun Matsuda-kun Matsuda-kun Matsuda-kun Matsuda-kun Matsuda-kun... Matsuda-kun.....

-- *H...Huh.....?*

That's strange. Something isn't right.

"I can't... remember...?"

Suddenly, my entire body was abuzz. I was assaulted by an unprecedented sense of fear and loneliness when I realized I couldn't remember Matsuda-kun.

-- *Is this what loss feels like?*

It was a hellish feeling like I never felt before. A terrible feeling, as if parts of my body were bitten off by evil demons.

"What is it? Your face is terribly pale."

".....Eh?" The second I looked back up at Madarai, I understood what was happening. The fear the man in front of my eyes cast over me took control over all my emotions. *That's* why I couldn't remember my feelings for Matsuda-kun.

"Your face looks like the face of someone who is about to be attacked." He cackled at his own unfunny joke.

-- *Matsuda-kun Matsuda-kun.*

Even swallowed by fear, I continued whispering his name inside my heart. My emotions did not respond. Nevertheless, I continued to whisper frantically. It was almost like a prayer.

-- *I want to see Matsuda-kun's face. I want to hear Matsuda-kun's voice. I want to smell Matsuda-kun. I want to touch Matsuda-kun. I want to meet Matsuda-kun. I want to meet Matsuda-kun. I want to meet Matsuda-kun.*

Suddenly, something changed.

My heart beat loudly, and my blood, which had until now been circulating nowhere in particular, began to flow into my limbs again. A surprising sense of heat melted the fear that was keeping my body frozen.

-- *I want to meet Matsuda-kun.*

I repeated the mantra several more times, and soon completely forgot the fear that was controlling my feelings.

-- *I want to meet Matsuda-kun! I want to meet Matsuda-kun! I want to meet Matsuda-kun!*

"I want to... meet Matsuda-kun....."

".....Hm?"

Madarai perceived the change in me and put some distance between us immediately. It seems that despite his looks, he was a cautious man... and that I reclaimed my composure enough to make that analysis. With that newfound composure I turned back to read my notebook once again, from the beginning. All of a sudden, my eyes stopped on the very first page.

There was an explanation regarding my talent written there.

It's strange that I never noticed it until now. It must be the power of love Matsuda-kun granted me!

-- *I'm going to meet Matsuda-kun! I'm going to meet Matsuda-kun! I'm going to meet Matsuda-kun!*

It was no longer just my heart's desire. It was now my clear goal, birthing a rekindled fever inside me.

".....Please step away," I declared to Madarai, raising my head from the notebook, "I'm going to meet Matsuda-kun!"

"Who the hell is that? Never mind that, what made you come back to life so suddenly?"

"Love, of course!" I yelled in triumph. "My power of love for Matsuda-kun!" I yelled unabashedly.

"I... agree that love is not something to be trifled with... It urges people to take unimaginable actions, and sometimes drives them to madness... although I'm not sure that's what's happening here."

"...In any case, don't stand in my way!" I scowled fiercely at Madarai.

"Or maybe, it's desperation that's driving you now? That would be a bother. You can never know what desperate people are going to do. It doesn't matter if they're weak or strong, it's always a bother."

"Shut up and move, already!"

"You're... truly a strange woman."

He lowered his center of weight, and crouched into a low posture. He must be attempting to preempt any possible attack. But --

It has nothing to do with me.

Something like that cannot hope to extinguish the red flame burning inside me!

-- *I'm going to meet Matsuda-kun! I'm going to meet Matsuda-kun! I'm going to meet Matsuda-kun!*

I defenselessly stepped forward in determination, my hand still holding the open notebook. In reaction, Madarai lowered his center of gravity even more, and prepared a clenched fist next to his lower back. He was ready for war. Nevertheless, it didn't seem like he was going to make the first move. He was extremely alert. I was right - he really does have a cautious personality.

But --

No, *because* of that --

I stopped right there, and yelled one more declaration.

"Checkmate, Isshiki Madarai!"

"What the hell? That's a lame catchphrase....."

".....Checkmate, Isshiki Madarai!"

I couldn't think of any other catchphrase, so I repeated the same one again. Like a wild animal about to swoop down on its prey, I slowly lowered my own center of gravity. I concentrated my entire body's strength into my two legs, and as soon as it was all accumulated --

-- I released it all at once!

I kicked the ground violently using every bit of stored energy, and started running as if my body erupted from an explosion -- away from Madarai, who was still on the alert.

"H...Hey!"

I heard Madarai's bewildered voice far behind me. It seemed he was not prepared for this development at all. Running, I opened my notebook to its first page again, and checked the explanation about my talent one more time.

That's right. This is my talent. My one and only way to come out of this situation winning.

I don't remember it, though, so it still doesn't feel quite real.

After a very short while I could hear running footsteps chasing me. I decided to put my predictions to the test. What is the man chasing me thinking right now? I'm pretty sure --

I'm pretty sure he's thinking something like, "now that's truly a strange woman."



## CHAPTER 7

"Now, that's truly a strange woman," Isshiki Madarai whispered to himself while running.

It wasn't that he wasn't careful. Quite the opposite - that was exactly why he was outsmarted. He couldn't have guessed from her actions that she would run away like this, but, in hindsight, he realized that what she did was only natural.

A cornered mouse will bite the cat, or so the proverb goes. But in reality, it's very rare to find a mouse who would bite a cat. Even when they're seriously injured, can hardly move, and completely cornered, a mouse's first thought is still try to try to escape.

That's just a mouse's true nature.

And that girl who turned heel and escaped is just the same. In other words, it's in her nature to run away.

"...In that case, all I have to do is catch her, and this will be over in no time." His mouth twisted in a cruel smile. His face was that of a hunter, chasing his prey. But his true goal wasn't simple relentless predatism... and that cruel smile was perhaps a little excessive.

*-- I'll catch her, and after giving her a good beating, I'll make her tell me everything about that incident...*

The Worst, Largest Incident in Hope's Peak Academy's History --

Madarai hated that incident and everyone involved in it. Right now, getting revenge for the incident was the only thing driving him. It gave him motivation.

He got his chance a few hours ago, when he received a suspicious anonymous message.

*Junko Enoshima, who knows the secrets behind the incident, is going to show up in the central plaza.*

The possibility of it being a trap had crossed his mind, but he didn't care. Even if it had been a trap, it would have been an opportunity to see who set it up.

*-- I'm going to get my revenge.*

*-- I must get my revenge - I still have someone who needs protection.*

There was a flame burning inside his eyes. The moment he caught sight of his prey, running ahead of him, he increased his own speed dramatically. His long hair flew behind him as he closed the distance between them in an instant. In no time at all, he would be able to reach out his arms and catch her.

*-- It's over.*

He pushed his left foot strongly into the ground, and reached out with his long right arm. He could feel his fingers touching his prey's hair -- when something happened.

The prey suddenly changed direction with a sharp turn, almost as if she was slipping through Madarai's hands. Taken by surprise, he lost his balance. She had timed her move *perfectly*, almost as if she planned it all ahead.

"....Keh!"

Madarai clicked his red tongue loudly, and was soon back on his feet. He turned back towards his prey and started running again, but he quickly noticed something strange. His prey, running ahead of him, was doing something ridiculous.

"...What...the...?"



The prey was was writing something in a notebook as she was running.

"Huh...?"

-- *Writing while running?*

-- *That's clearly impossible, however you look at it.*

He was bewildered. It wasn't just that he couldn't understand why she was doing it -- he did not expect his prey to do anything other than simply try to escape.

Isn't she just a mouse, running away from danger?

Could she actually have a plan, beyond escaping?

But, it could also be a bluff. Just like when she first ran away, she might just be taking advantage of his vigilance in order to obtain a chance to escape again.

Well, whatever it was, Madarai didn't have time for hesitation. His desire for revenge for The Worst, Largest Incident in Hope's Peak Academy's History was too intense for him to give up now. He recklessly increased his speed, and was soon within reach of his prey once again.

-- *This time it's really over.*

He reached his right hand toward his prey's blind spot, and grabbed her.

No -- all he grabbed was empty air.

Once again, with timing that seemed precisely calculated, his prey suddenly changed course. Madarai, still pulled forward by leftover energy, saw a huge tree emerging from the darkness in front of him. He thrust his arms forward in panic, and the palms of his hands were soon met with the roughness of the tree's bark.

-- *What the hell is going on?!*

Madarai kicked at the ground in anger, and was soon back in full speed. His prey was quickly within reach again, but as he reached his arms to strike her she managed to slip away and escape again.

-- *I can't catch her?*

Even as that realization slowly dawned on Madarai, he couldn't explain it. She wasn't even turning her head to look at him - her eyes were constantly on her notebook. How is she able to avoid his arms, coming at her from behind her back? She wasn't even avoiding him *clumsily*- she did it with perfect timing.

It was almost as if she could see what was going on behind her back... No, that can't be right. Her timing was far too perfect for it to be something as simple as that.

-- *It's like she knows what's going to happen in advance.*

"You've got to be kidding..."

Madarai shook off the thought from his head and accelerated to full speed again. Soon, he was at his prey's defenseless back, reaching out his arm once again. The moment he was about to touch her -- just as he expected, the prey dodged his hand and escaped. This time, however, Madarai anticipated it, and turned his body sideways to match her movement. He extended both of his long arms and jumped toward the prey. It was a spectacular tackle.

He had her!

...Or so he thought.

".....Wha--?!"

It was as if she knew he was going to anticipate her dodge. She crouched -- again, with perfect timing -- and passed by Madarai's feet like a turtle, causing him to clumsily twist his body forward and crash violently onto the ground.

Madarai lay on the lawn for a short while, unable to move. He wasn't in pain... but a different kind of damage had been inflicted upon him.

"What... the hell...?"

At long last, he got back on his feet. He shook his long hair from his eyes and searched for his prey. He could see her figure running away, already small in the distance. As he watched his escaping prey, Madarai whispered to himself in an amazed tone.

"...I'm begging you. Please don't tell me she has precognition."



## CHAPTER 8

-- *Precognition?*

That's probably what he's thinking right now, but no such thing exists, of course. No, it probably *does* exist somewhere in this world - at least, I'd like to think dreams sometimes mean something - but there's no way such a hackneyed power would awaken inside me during a dangerous situation... This isn't a comic book, after all.

No, this isn't something as outrageous as precognition --

These are just predictions.

I've been analyzing the things he seemed to think and the actions he took, and predicting the actions he was likely to take next. That's what my notebook taught me my talent is.

*Super analytical proficiency.*

I've been using my talent, and predicting his next moves by analyzing his behaviour patterns statistically. That's all.

That said, that kind of analysis requires a vast amount of data. Without data, I can't predict anything at all. But, that's exactly what "Ryouko Otonashi's Memory Notebook" is for.

I've been extracting behavior patterns from his speech and actions, and have been exhaustively writing them down as usable data in my notebook. The battle between Madarai and Enoshima-san was a particularly important source of data: she attacked Madarai using a variety of techniques, and possibly even let herself get hit on purpose. Now that I think about it, she was probably trying to show me as many of his attack patterns as she could. I have no idea why someone like Enoshima-san would do something like that for me, but there's no doubt that's exactly why I'm able to predict his current behaviour so perfectly.

Nevertheless, I can't possibly predict *everything* about him based on just a few minutes' worth of data. It's just that my current goal is simply to predict how he was going to behave in a chase situation -- and for that I have more than enough. That's how I knew the timing, angles and techniques he was going to use to try to catch me.

But, my current prediction is that he isn't going to give up just yet.

Right now, he's still perplexed at the skill I have displayed. If my prediction is correct, he's going to realize very soon that the source of my newfound power lies in my notebook. It's likely he's going to chase me much more seriously from now on. If that's the case, there's a limit to how much I can keep running away randomly.

So, what should I do --?

I predict... that the answer will probably come to me soon.

I've been running for a while, relying on the crude map of the central plaza that's drawn in my notebook. Soon, I passed the area overgrown with trees and came to a clearing. Just as I predicted, there was small building there. That was my destination. The moment I saw it, fear and bravery began to intermingle inside my head.

But, I have no choice.

I have to forget any fear and anxiety. I have no choice.

I have no choice if I want to meet Matsuda-kun.

I have to do it. I'm *sure* I can do it! By the way, that wasn't a prediction just now. It was just enthusiasm.





## **CHAPTER 9**

Madarai reached a conclusion. There was some kind of secret hiding in that notebook.

Yes, that must be it. There is no such thing as precognition. She's been insistently writing in that notebook of hers despite the fact that terrible things are going to happen to her if she's caught -- which means her secret must be in there. Madarai could not imagine what that secret was, but he was certain that there *was* one.

-- *Which means, if I snatch it away everything's going to be fine.*

Madarai hadn't always been prone to complicated thoughts. He has often been told that contrary to his looks he was a cautious man, but that wasn't a trait he was born with. It was simply necessary for the job he had until recently.

But now... Now, that job was meaningless.

-- *It was my fault.*

-- *It was because I couldn't protect them.*

The only job that mattered now was finding the culprit responsible for The Worst, Largest Incident in Hope's Peak Academy's History, and getting revenge.

"...I can't afford to stand still. Not now." Madarai started running again, and thought about what he had to do next in simple terms.

-- *Catch my prey. Hurt her. Make her talk.*

Now thoroughly serious, Madarai ran with all his power in the direction his prey had fled. He may have lost some time, but it was not yet a fatal loss. Even if she managed to escape, all he had to do was keep chasing her. As long as he didn't give up, it wouldn't be over.

-- *Catch. Hurt. Talk.*

He repeated those three words to himself, slipping through the dark trees like a black snake. He was paying careful attention to his surroundings as he ran, and suddenly, his field of vision expanded. He arrived at a small clearing that looked like a plaza. He surveyed the area, and soon noticed a small prefab shed on the other side of the clearing. Light from a street lamp next to the shed flickered continuously, creating an ominous atmosphere right out of a horror movie.

Suspicious. Very suspicious.

But even so...

"...It would be faster to investigate than to wonder what's going on."

Madarai reduced his speed, and stepped carefully towards the shed. Its cream colored walls and roof would normally seem pleasant -- calming, even -- but under the flickering light they just seemed eerie. Madarai stood in front of the shed, and started by peeking through the window set in one of the walls. The room in front of his eyes was dusty, matching the flickering light coming from above. It must be used for storage by the custodian of the central plaza. There were shelves packed with fertilizer bags and paint cans, as well as cleaning tools cramped all over the place. He couldn't see anyone inside -- but there were a lot of places someone could hide.

Madarai turned away from the window and headed to the shed's entrance. The door was wooden and light. He first touched it with just his fingertips, and once he confirmed it wasn't booby trapped, he turned the handle.

It didn't open. Someone must have locked it.

Madarai crouched, and observed the grass growing around the shed. Patches of the ankle-high weeds were bent at their tips. Someone had stepped on them recently.

-- *Well, that settles it.*

However, this certainty did not at all come as a relief. Quite the opposite - the cautiousness Madarai had briefly forgotten returned in full force.

-- *So, what kind of trap has she prepared for me?*

Madarai took a couple of deep breaths. Then, right after he let the deepest one out, he turned to the door and kicked it with all his strength.

*Wham!*

The door opened just a little bit, making a dull noise.

*Wham! Wham!*

After a few more kicks, the gap in the door was wide enough for a single person to pass through. Beyond that gap, there was only darkness. Madarai lowered his posture and slipped into it carefully.

"Excuse me, coming in..."

The sound of feet on sand rippled through the silence. The room was larger than it seemed from the outside, and the only illumination came from the flickering light outside the window, which had little effect on the gloomy dimness covering everything. Spiderwebs spread in every corner of the shed. Opposite the window was a large stack of shelves filled with paint cans. Gravel and dustballs were scattered all over the floor, with cleaning and maintenance tools cluttered here and there. In addition, several large heaps of fertilizer sacks were stacked all around the room.

"Hey, I know you're hiding here somewhere!"

Madarai's voice echoed through the small room, and suddenly his eyes were drawn to a certain spot. Behind one of the sack heaps, he thought he saw *something* moving. A small, shivering movement, almost as if in response to Madarai's voice.

-- *There she is.*

Madarai advanced slowly toward the pile with increased cautiousness. There had to be a trap here, somewhere. Many of the tools in this shed could be used as a weapon in the hands of a scared prey. Madarai could see her in his mind, hiding in the darkness clutching one of them in her trembling hands.

"...What are you planning?"

Raising his voice and staying alert, he moved even closer to the pile of sacks. By the time he reached the middle of the room, his eyes were completely adjusted to the darkness.

"Well, if you plan to attack me, go right ahead," he said in a cruel, flat voice. "But I'm warning you, you will regret it later. You're going to be in a world of *hu--!!??*"

It was only for a second, but he had no clue what was going on. He felt something exploding on his face, and a moment later everything around him turned white.

"...Ku!" Moaning, he half-opened his eyes. His surroundings were engulfed in white fog.

"...Take that!" The prey, standing in front of his eyes, threw some kind of a white lump at him from behind the pile of sacks. As soon as the lump hit Madarai's body, it seemed to burst open and scatter in the air. As soon as the prey finished throwing, she thrust her hand into one of the sacks in front of her, grabbed a large amount of powder from it, and earnestly threw a third lump at him.

"Take that! And that!"

Madarai didn't flinch, but he was astounded. This was an "attack" in name only. A childish quarrel. It was like a snowball fight, using powder instead of snow.

"Stupid...!" Madarai's face twisted in anger. He got excessively upset at the thought he was being so cautious of what turned out to be nothing but a waste of time.

-- *Whatever. Let's just end this.*

The flickering light reflected sharply in Madarai's eyes, when --

"...Do you know what a dust explosion is?" The girl raised her voice at the exact moment Madarai was about to move. His momentum was cut off, and he stopped instinctively.

"What do you think would happen... if I start a fire right now?"

"W...What are you...?"

Right now, the room was completely covered with flying white powder. A certain disturbing image crossed Madarai's mind. He could imagine the fire spreading from one dust particle to the next, igniting them and blowing up the entire shed.

"...If you do that, it's over for you too."

"...I thought it's over for me no matter what I do."

Upon hearing those words, Madarai remembered his own words. *It's impossible to predict what someone in despair will do.*

Madarai concentrated his eyes on the white fog. He could see the girl's silhouette beyond the dust, but he couldn't tell what expression was on her face. He brushed some of the dust from in front of his eyes, and could finally see her face.

It was completely blank.

Furthermore, her entire body had a strange intimidating air about it.

"Who the hell *are* you...?"

It wasn't the face of a frightened prey. Her colorless eyes didn't even twinkle. They were just staring directly at him, unflinching. Madarai's spine shivered.

"I don't think you can do it... There's nothing here you can use to start a fire."

"....."

The girl stayed silent. The air around Madarai became heavy as a feeling of tension wrapped itself firmly around his body. Dark emotions slowly corroded deep inside mind.

-- *Who the hell is that girl?*

Madarai thought he could see his own shivering self reflected in her colorless eyes.

-- *Should I run away? Try to attack first?*

The two options fluttered in rapid succession inside his head. Then, suddenly --

For just a split second - his victim's eyes moved.

Madarai turned by reflex to the point she was looking at -- and saw an industrial vacuum cleaner in the middle of the clutter on the floor. Right next to it was a bare electric outlet.

Vacuum cleaner -- Electric outlet -- Sparks!

The thoughts connected inside his brain like in an association game. Before he knew it, Madarai started to move. He had no time to hesitate! No margin for caution! He had to get there faster than she could!

Madarai took off, almost as if leaping at the vacuum cleaner. He stretched his long arms towards it and grabbed the hose, and then pulled it strongly towards him as if he was about to wield it.

That was when he felt something was not quite right.

There was some resistance when he pulled. Too much resistance. That wasn't all -- the girl herself didn't move a single step. He could see her standing still from the corner of his eye, even now that he had the vacuum cleaner in his hand. He even thought he saw her eyes glittering in anticipation.

-- *Oh, poo poo!*

The sense that something wasn't right transformed into a single word in Madarai's mind.

-- *Trap.*

...But, it was too late.

A large shadow covered Madarai's vision. It was the shadow of the large stack of shelves, inclining slowly towards him. Cans of paint clattered in slow motion as they fell down from the shelves, on their way toward him.

The shadow drew nearer.

It was already right in front of his eyes.

And then, with a thunderous roar and a cloud of dust --

Isshiki Madarai was flattened by the fallen shelves.



## **CHAPTER 10**

The dust in the room was thrown up in the air, along with a roaring, ground-rumbling noise. The colorful cans of paint that were lined on the shelves had splattered their contents all over the walls and the ceiling, making the inside of the shed seem like it was lifted straight out of Wonderland.

I inhaled some of the dust, and managed to cough violently while giving a sigh of relief. I had predicted that Madarai's vigilant nature wouldn't let him leave the vacuum cleaner alone right after hearing about a dust explosion. It seems I was right.

I threw the shed's window open, grabbed a shovel and stepped carefully toward the fallen shelves in order to check the condition of the crushed boy. I had to feign bravery while I was confronting him, but my feet were still shaking with nervousness. The hand holding the shovel was already dripping with sweat.

"Hello...?"

I peeked nervously through the gap in the shelves, and saw Madarai pressed between them and the floor, as if he was the filling of a strange sandwich. It seemed he was still conscious, though, because he managed to look at me weakly.

"I...I can't believe I fell for that..." It seemed talking was painful for him, perhaps because his chest was under heavy pressure. "B...But... why wasn't there an explosion? T...There must have been static electricity and sparks from such a huge impact..."

"Ah. This is cement powder, so it won't explode," I answered, still brandishing the shovel.

"...Cement powder?"

I adjusted my hold on the shovel, and opened my notebook with my free hand.

"Um, let's see... The necessary conditions for a dust explosion are flammable dust, oxygen, and a source of fire... But cement powder isn't oxidized so it doesn't burn. In other words, it isn't flammable dust so it can't cause a dust explosion... That seems to be the explanation."

"And you... knew all that..."

"It seems the old man in charge of this shed really loves to talk... He sometimes catches random people and makes them listen to him ramble on... By the way, don't you think it's kinda shady that he told all that to a random high-school girl? But, I guess it ended up saving my life so I should go thank him once this is over..."

I flipped through my notebook some more, and continued.

"Anyway, it seems this old man is really into DIY projects, and loves to build anything that isn't too complicated on his own. It looks like that's why he bought a large amount of cement powder, and stored it here in this shed."

"A...And you used that as a decoy..."

"Yes. I wanted you to pull that vacuum cleaner."

I dropped my eyes to the notebook again and nodded vigorously.

"Ah! By the way, have you heard of a movie called Home Alone? I used one of the traps from it as a basis for this one. I tied the vacuum cleaner and the shelves together with a rope, so that when you pull the vacuum cleaner the shelves come down after it... Oh, that's right -- the dust's secondary purpose was to keep the rope hidden. I used a white rope, you see..."

"...You can stop now." Madarai interrupted me with a weak voice.

"S...So... was this trap the ace up your sleeve...?"

"No... I have a different one. After all, in Home Alone, it wasn't Culkin-kun who ultimately stopped the robbers. It was the adults who came to save him. It was that way in both the first and the second movies. So, you see -- the ace up my sleeve would be when someone comes to save me and..."

"...Yes, I get it. Please stop." Madarai twisted his face as if he was getting bored. "B...But, don't you think it's still early for you to think you've won?"

"...Huh?" His strange expression caught my attention, and I couldn't help returning a question. "Um... what do you mean?"

"I...I mean I haven't shown you... the ace up *my* sleeve yet...", leaving those words, Madarai finally sank into silence. He didn't reply even when I prodded him - it seemed he had lost his consciousness.

I had the feeling something was left half-baked, but since my notebook also taught me there's a chance I might catch pneumoconiosis if I inhale too much dust, I decided to first get out of the shed. Well, I guess the school's security department can take care of things later. I'll leave it to them to apprehend that strange boy - once they do, it's all going to be over. He committed the serious crime of assaulting a woman, so I think they're going to expel him from the school. And that means I'll never see him again--

"...Buggyuuu!"

The person who let out a groan like a small animal being stepped on -- was me.

I felt a sharp pain on my throat.

Something rugged was tightened around it, making it impossible to breathe.

-- *What?*

-- *What's going on?*

Even deep in confusion, I could tell there was a black telephone pole in front of my eyes.

-- *Wait, why a telephone pole?*

I looked up, my thoughts becoming even more confused -- and saw a white face on top of the tall and narrow telephone pole. It appeared to be a man's face. Furthermore, it was a face I recognized. There are some things even someone as forgetful as me can recognize. I mean, that face --

Was the face of the man who was supposed to be unconscious under a stack of shelves - it was Madarai's face.

"...You seem surprised."

He wasn't injured. Even his clothes were perfectly clean.

"I think I know what you're thinking. 'Why is the man I just took down inside the shed now standing here strangling me?'... Am I right?" A cruel smile tore through Madarai's face. "To make things short, this is the ace up *my* sleeve. Well, a part of it, anyway."

His eyes, narrow to their limit, were fixed on me. They were oily and glittering.

"Well, then. I think I'll begin by breaking your arms and legs. It's going to hurt for just a little while, so please endure it patiently. Hmm, maybe I should wait until you lose consciousness... It's going to be a bother if you start screaming."

His tone of voice was more composed than cruel. It was clear it wouldn't be any use at all begging for my life.

Madarai applied even more strength into the hand that was strangling me, and I felt my consciousness slowly slipping away. I felt emptiness, as if my very own self was fading away, as each and every sensation was eradicated from my body.

I couldn't say anything anymore. I couldn't breathe anymore. I couldn't make any predictions anymore.

My notebook dropped from my hand. My eyes became hazy, my vision blurred. In front of my eyes, both the scenery and Madarai himself became twisted.

That's right. Twisted.

Madarai's body twisted, then flipped upside down as if it was drawing an arc in the air. Then, with a loud, thick sound, it crashed down on the ground head first.

That's what I saw.

From within my vanishing consciousness, which flickered in and out like a candle, I couldn't tell if it was reality or a dream -- but nevertheless, I saw it.

"Guuuuuuu..."

Grunting like a trampled frog, Madarai quickly regained his posture. Then, the moment he jumped back up, his eyes were drawn to his right arm, and he stared at it, transfixed.

His right arm, from the elbow down...  
...Was unnaturally twisted, like bent licorice candy.

At first, he just stared at it with a confused expression on his face. Then, as though he suddenly remembered how to, he raised his voice in a terrible scream.

"HIGYAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAH!!"

His voice was a mixture of confusion, terror and pain. It came out with such a force, that it almost seemed like he squeezed out every bit of air out of his body.

I heard that dreadful scream, but all I could do was stand there, dumbfounded. No, I didn't even know if I was still standing up, or if I fell to the ground. I couldn't understand anything that was going on. And then, I heard a voice I also could not understand.

"Upupu. I may have overdone it, just a little bit."

I'm not even sure I can call it a voice. A *noise* might be a more appropriate description.

"...Well, it's not like I had any choice. It would be a pain for me if you died here. After all, you're the protagonist of this story, at least for now."

That's when I noticed it.

I wonder how I could have missed it until now.

There was a pitch-black silhouette standing right before me. And on top of that black silhouette floated a face I remembered seeing somewhere before.

...But I couldn't remember. I couldn't remember whose face it was.

"Upupu. You don't remember who I am, do you, you bastard? I guess that's just natural. But don't worry - I'm sure you'll come to remember soon enough." After saying that in a laughing tone, the voice coming out of the shadow turned lower. "...But first, there's something that still requires taking care of here."

What happened next...  
...Started before I knew what was going on, and ended in a split second.

First, there was a hand on top of Madarai's head. He was still on the ground, screaming. The hand started stroking his head, gently. Madarai looked up with a surprised expression on his face, when suddenly... there was a snapping noise and his head, fixed with the same expression, began to spin. Finally, it stopped at an inexplicable angle.

Madarai collapsed on the ground before he knew what was happening to him. He spitted red foam at my feet, his body convulsing in short spasms.

-- *Ah. This is just a dream.*

That was the conclusion my mind reached then and there, and I could feel my body strangely relax. Yes, it couldn't be anything else. This scene is so far removed from reality, it can't possibly be anything but a dream.

“Upupupu.”

Even that laughing voice echoing deep inside my ears... just a dream.

Before I knew what was happening, the black shadow was once again standing right in front of me. But, this is also definitely a dream.

The face floating on top of the shadow, who I was sure I’ve seen before, started talking again. “Until you can remember better, you should call me... Super High-school Level Despair. Yeah, I think that fits. Upupupu.”

The eyes on that face were excessively dark. In fact, they looked more like holes than eyes. I stared at them blankly, and felt as if my consciousness was being sucked up into their void. Inside the holes was a bottomless swamp, full of black mud. My entire body was quickly drenched in it, as I was slowly consumed by something that wasn’t myself.

Then, I heard a voice from somewhere far away.

“See you soon, you bastard! When we meet again, I’ll kill you properly!”

It was a small voice, coming from far away, but at the same time it seemed like it was also whispering directly inside my ears.

-- *This sure is a strange dream.*

With that last thought, I finally became totally submerged inside the bottomless swamp, and then my consciousness was completely lost.





## CHAPTER 11

".....Hm?", the girl tilted her neck.

".....Hm? Hm? Hm?", Junko Enoshima tilted her neck grandiosely.

"Hmmmmmm... It's great that I came back and all, but... what's going on here?"

She swayed up from her crouching posture. There was something right in front of her eyes. It was a dead body. A man, his neck and arms twisted in a strange way.

"Um... Let's see. This guy is..." She raised her hand to her chin, and closed her eyes tightly, posing like a great detective on the verge of a huge deduction. After a short period of indecision, Junko Enoshima suddenly raised her voice in a cheer. "Oh, I remember! That's right, his name was Madarai! By the way, that's silly of me -- forgetting who someone I just killed myself is... I hope that forgetfulness of hers isn't contagious. Just kidding! Aha! Ahahahahaha!"

Enoshima's laughter echoed through the night sky, and seemed to pile up on top of itself. It was as if there were more than one of her, laughing in simultaneous chorus.

But, the next moment, her laughter stopped. Her face turned sullen, as if she suddenly got tired of laughing.

"There's also the issue of that other missing body... Honestly, where did that old geezer go...?"

Suddenly, she was laughing again. There was a wide smile on her face, as if she had suddenly tired of sullenness.

"Well, it's not like it *matters* where he disappeared to, right? Upupu, I am so despair-inducingly great at planning plans!"

The second her declaration was done, her face turned sullen yet again.

"But, it's so unsatisfying when your plans always succeed... Whose fault is this? Is anyone going to take responsibility?"

Her expression changed with every sentence that came out of her mouth, but none of it was an act. Every time, it reflected her true feelings. Despair-inducing capriciousness - that's what she was all about.

"Super High-school Level Despair", Junko Enoshima.

With the sullen expression still on her face, Enoshima trotted towards Madarai's dead body. "It's *your* fault, y'know. Take that!" She started thrusting her tiptoes into the body. "Hey, say something! What's up with being so easy to kill?! You should've at least made an effort to disrupt my plans! How can I possibly despair like that?!"

At that point, she suddenly changed her voice. "I...It hurts! I'm sorryyyyyy!", she mimicked the dead Madarai's voice, as if she was on a morbid ventriloquism show. "Enoshima-sama! Please forgive me!" She continued kicking the body as she spoke for it with a comical, over-dramatic voice. Dark-red liquid came flowing out of the body's mouth. "I'll repent by committing suicide, so please forgive me!"

Enoshima returned to her normal voice. "But you can't do that! You're already dead!". Having delivered her grand punchline, she stepped hard on Madarai's face.

*Splat.* A thick sound of something being crashed echoed through the air.

"Upupupupupupupupupupupup!"

Enoshima laughed a loud vulgar laugh, as if her one-woman show was the funniest thing she'd ever heard.

Nevertheless, she soon got tired of that too, and her face returned to its original expression.

"Well, then... I guess I have to call that pitiful sister of mine, and ask her to clean things up over here."

-- *First, I'll have her take care of this dirty body.*

-- *Then, she'll have to clean up inside that shed, too.*

"And finally, I just have to carry Ryouko Otonashi-chan to her beloved boyfriend, and my work here will be done!"

Having confirmed her immediate plans to herself, Enoshima started laughing again, as if she had just remembered something funny.

"Upupupupupupupupupupupup!!"

She laughed vulgarly and grandiosely, facing the sky, both her arms spread to her sides. Her cruel, gruesome laughter echoed high in the night sky. There was no coherence to it, nor any necessity or sentiment.

That was what "Super High-school Level Despair" Junko Enoshima was all about.



## **CHAPTER 12**

When I finally opened my eyes, there was a ceiling above me.

It seems I fell asleep somewhere, but since, being forgetful, I always forget the circumstances I've fallen asleep in, I wasn't especially confused. I calmly turned my eyes from the ceiling and saw a window. A clear beam of sunlight came in through a gap in the curtains, illuminating the white room I was in. It seems it was morning.

This room... It was a room I couldn't remember. But that's the same as always, too.

Anyway, my first order of business should be to calmly confirm the situation in "Ryouko Otonashi's Memory Notebook", and so I calmly tried to rise up from the bed -- and then realized that I couldn't.

"...What's going on?"

My body was firmly tied to the bed with a sturdy-looking rope. It was a magnificent knot I could only describe as "craftsmanlike", and it bound me so tightly I could hardly move my body at all. I couldn't even turn my neck well, which made looking around the room impossible. At this point, I finally started to feel panic at this incoherent state of affairs. In other words, I went from "What's going on?" to "What's going on?!!".

"W...What's going on?!!"

But, no matter how much I struggled, all I could do was shake and rattle the bed. Not only did the diligently tied rope show no signs of becoming looser, it seemed to actually be getting tighter.

"S...Someone...!" I started screaming, carried away by fear. "H...HELP MEEEEEEEEEE!!"

Once I started, I couldn't stop.

"PLEEEEEEEEEEEASE!" I screamed and screamed and screamed. "SOOOOOOOOOMEONE! HELP MEEEEEEEEEE!"

Then, after my earnest calls for help has been going on for a short while --

"You're being too loud, dung beetle."

The words were abusive, but my heart start beating even faster than it already was!

"Eh? Matsuda-kun?"

"If you want to scream, do it more quietly, you dullard."

"It *is* you, Matsuda-kun!"

From the moment I knew for certain that the mocking voice belonged to my beloved Matsuda-kun, my only desire was to rush and search for him. But since my head was tightly tied to the bed, I couldn't even look around.

"Where are you, Matsuda-kun?" I called, frantically.

"Where...? I'm right under you, isn't that obvious?"

"Huh? Under me?"

"I'm under the bed you're lying on, you cheap woman."

Even disregarding his cheap woman comment, what he said was most unexpected.

"Eh? Why are you under the bed?"

"I'm doing mental concentration exercises to subdue my anger."

Being in the midst of a bondage situation I couldn't confirm it with my own eyes, but his voice certainly seemed to come from the other side of the bed. It seemed that he was, in fact, under it.

".....Um, are mental exercises usually done under beds?"

"For me, they are."

It seems Matsuda-kun is a man of many colors.

"Hey, Matsuda-kun. If something is troubling you, you can always come to me. I'll listen to your troubles anytime."

"I think I'll take you up on that offer, then..."

Matsuda-kun breathed deeply once, and then suddenly started talking his mouth off.

"On the dawn of a sleepless night, I was informed that an ugly friend of mine went missing. So, I had no choice but to go searching for her all over the place. But when I came back to the lab I suddenly discovered her ugly, dirty body lying on top of my bed, sleeping like a log and snoring to boot. Care to tell me how best to handle the anger that had engulfed me then?"

".....That sounds like a truly ugly friend you have."

"It's you."

Yep. That was to be expected!

"...Um, so I've gone missing?"

"Someone who can't even remember themselves going missing shouldn't be allowed to act freely. I guess tying you up was a good decision."

...That means the person who tied me up was Matsuda-kun. How surprising! I wouldn't have imagined he could tie such a masterful knot! This is even a little stimulating!

"Anyway, I'm going to keep you tied for a while so you can reflect on what you did."

"...Um, how long would you estimate 'a while' is?"

"Let's see... Until the next World Cup would be --"

"That's too long!!"

"...I guess you have a point. Well, then - we'll make it most of today."

"Even that's a little excessive! One shouldn't tie their lover to a bed for an entire day!"

"Who are you calling your lover? I'm not the type of weirdo that would have vermin as a girlfriend."

"V...Vermin...?"

I couldn't find anything to say in response to his excessive nastiness. In any case, it appears that he really *was* angry, and not just faking it. The fact that he now stayed quiet proved it.

On top of the bed, I was silent.

Under the bed, Matsuda-kun was silent.

That awkward silence continued for a while.

After some time passed, Matsuda-kun sighed and said, "...Honestly, you've always been that way."

"Eh? What are you talking about?"

"I just remembered. Something like this happened before... You've always known the perfect ways to irritate me."

"I'm not sure if I want to hear about it or not... but I guess I want to, after all. So, what happened before?"

Matsuda-kun started telling the story slowly, as he struggled to turn the memories in his head into words.

"It was... just after you started elementary school."

I was surprised at how old this story seemed to be, but at the same time I was happy. It meant I've been together with Matsuda-kun ever since I was little, and that he remembered such an ancient story about me.

But, I don't remember it, of course. There's nothing I can do about that.

"You were skillful in the sandpit, and started building a surprisingly large and intricate sand sculpture at the public park. It was modeled after the Sagrada Familia church. That's really amazing, isn't it? I mean, a tiny elementary school student deciding she wants to build the Sagrada Familia! And on top of that, you even knew how to use some advanced techniques involving hardening the sand with some water. It took you an entire month to build."

"A...An entire month?!"

"The real Sagrada Familia has been under construction for over a hundred and twenty years. and it *still* isn't complete. It isn't too surprising it would take that long to build a perfect replica out of sand..."

But still, an entire month! I wonder what I wanted to prove back then.

"It was truly an amazing sand sculpture. No one could believe it was built by an elementary school student. As you were getting closer to completion, many people from around the neighbourhood came over just to watch you work. It was a huge success. But... you never did get to complete it."

"Eh? Why? You said I was really close to..."

Matsuda-kun answered my question in a somewhat depressed tone.

"Someone destroyed it. Just when it was about to be completed."

"D...Destroyed it...?" An image suddenly appeared in the back of my mind. An image of the pitiful wreck of a sand sculpture that's been trampled on.

"W...What the heck? You have to be a truly heartless person to destroy the work of an elementary school girl!" I was still tied to the bed, but my voice had fire raging in it.

"At the time, you said the same thing and started crying hysterically. You cried continuously for almost an entire day."

"Well, that's to be expected!" I felt intense sympathy for my elementary school self.

"As you'd expect, I felt angry about what happened and decided to go search for the culprit myself... but, no matter how much I searched, I couldn't find a trace of them. There wasn't even supposed to be anyone at the park when the Sagrada Familia got destroyed except for you. I couldn't find any other witnesses, and my investigation reached a dead end. I think I got really depressed at that point... I remember sitting on a bench at the park staring at the remains of the Sagrada Familia, when you suddenly came running to me. Surprisingly, you had a huge smile on your face, like I've never seen before."

"Ah, I got it! I must have found the culprit myself!"

"No, that wasn't it." He sounded as if it would be much better had that been the case.

"You came and whispered in my ear. You told me to keep it a secret, but that it was you who destroyed the Sagrada Familia."

".....Huh?" I was struck by complete surprise. "Um... so, I spent a full month working on a sand sculpture, and when it was nearing completion, I destroyed it myself?"

"An irritating story, isn't it?"

"I...Irritating or not... why would I ever do such a thing in the first place?"

"I asked you that. You said it was an accident. I mean, in that case you should've said so from the beginning! Thanks to you, I wasted a lot of time searching for a culprit!"

To think I wasted an entire month of work with an accident... How much of an idiot was I? I can't sympathise at all.

"When all is said and done, you just used me as your plaything. So, do you get it now? Do you get how much of a bother you are?"

"Yep! I guess I'm at a level where it's best to just tie me up after all!"

"We have reached a rare agreement, then."

Just like that, I approved myself being tied up -- but I still had one regret. It was an intense regret that I'm not even sure a word like "regret" describes very well.

"Grrrrrrrrrrrrr..."

"What is it? Does your stomach hurt?"

".....No, that's not it. It's just vexing. I finally got to hear Matsuda-kun speaking about his memories of me, but since I don't have my notebook I'm going to forget it all soon. Grrrr."

"If you want your notebook, I put it right next to the pillow."

"Eh? Really?" My heart leaped at this unexpected lifeboat for love. "Which side? Left or right? Or maybe, neither of them?"

"Calm down, dimwit. It should be to your right."

If it's to my right, I should concentrate on my right side! I strained the eyeball muscles and turned them toward the pillow. As expected, there was something there that looked like a notebook. "Ah! There it is!"

I stretched my neck like a turtle, and got the tip of the notebook between my lips. Then, I abused my tongue muscles and somehow succeeded in getting the notebook open.

...Opening it is one thing, but how am I supposed to write anything? As I contemplated that fundamental problem, a certain sentence entered my field of vision by chance.

*"It seems Junko Enoshima killed him ---"*

The letters looked like twisted hieroglyphs that were written with a very shaky hand.

I didn't understand what they meant.

"Junko Enoshima killed him...? Is this about a movie or something?"

I heard a loud bang from under the bed, and felt it shake from the power of the impact.

"...Oy. What did you say?" Matsuda-kun's voice was suddenly very stiff. "What was it you said just now?"

"Eh? Um...", I was disturbed by the intensity of his voice and used my eyeball muscles once again to look at the notebook, when another shocking sentence appeared in front of me.

*"I discovered a dead body at the central plaza"*

-- A dead body?

It took me about three seconds to understand what I just read. Then, I started screaming.

"A...A...A dead bodyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyy?!"

The rope dug forcefully into my body as I tried to jump out of the bed. "Owowowowowowow--" I screamed a different type of scream.

Nevertheless, Matsuda-kun didn't seem to care about my predicament. He just asked the question again in his stiff voice.

"You said... Junko Enoshima, didn't you?"

But, I didn't care about some girl's name anymore.

"A...A dead body! I...It says here I found a dead body! W-W-W-What am I going to do? ...What do you do when you find a body?"

"More importantly, answer my question. Do you know who Junko Enoshima is?"

-- *More importantly?*

Upon hearing those words, a bad feeling spread through my body. I mean... what could be more important than discovering a body? That's just not natural.

"H...Hey, Matsuda-kun," I boldly decided to ask him directly. "You seem to be worried about that Junko Enoshima person. Is she a friend of yours or something?"

I could hear a short gulping sound from under the bed.

"H...Hey, Matsuda kun --"

"There is no dead body."

".....Eh?"

"If you really had found one... the school would've been in an uproar by now. There is no way you did..."

"T...That's not it... About that girl... um, what was her name again...?"

I looked for my notebook, and discovered that it slipped to the area of my chest when I was screaming and struggling. No matter how much I stretched my neck and tongue, I couldn't get to it anymore.

"...That's enough. I was mistaken. That girl has nothing to do with either me *or* you. Forget about it."

For some reason, I got the impression his words were colored with irritation.

"B...But, I can't just forget it that easily... I mean, it was written right there in my notebook so it must be something that really happened to me..."

"That's not necessarily true."

".....Eh?"

"Finding a body... Meeting a strange girl... They're most likely just stories you made up. You're simply mistaking them for true memories right now."

"I...I'd never write made up stories in my notebook... I mean, if I did they'd get mixed up with my memories, which would be a terrible thing..."

"Maybe that's exactly why you did it?"

"Eh?"

"I'm thinking you may have mixed fake stories with your memories on purpose."

My heart became hazy as I listened to his blunt words.

"W...Why would I do such a thing?"

"You're always saying how nothing has anything to do with you. Nevertheless, you must feel lonely sometimes, don't you? You can't retain any memories so you can't form connections with anyone around you... I'm sure that can get very lonely."

"...Huh?" I felt my breathing becoming rough.

"That's right. You got lonely. That's why you fabricated all of those delusional stories--"

"I've never been lonely!" I screamed, not being able to take it anymore.

"Oh, and you remember that?!" Matsuda's sullen voice yelled back from under the bed.

"That's not it at all!" I screamed even louder. Matsuda-kun's words were so off the mark -- they so misunderstood who I was -- that I couldn't do anything but scream.

"I'm sure I told you a million times! I'm sure you got tired of hearing me blabbering about it! As long as I have Matsuda-kun I'm fine! As long as I have Matsuda-kun I'd never get lonely! I'm sure I told you that many, many times!"

I screamed so hard my breathing got out of order. I screamed so hard my voice buzzed inside my own ears. It might have been cowardly to shelve my own forgetfulness, but I wanted Matsuda-kun to remember, no matter the cost. I couldn't give up.

"If I can remember that despite my forgetfulness... how can *you* forget it, Matsuda-kun?!"

After the echos of my screams were gone, there was silence.

An awkward silence.

Finally, Matsuda-kun broke the silence with a whisper. ".....Anyway, what's written there is a lie." He probably wanted to put an end to the conversation once and for all, but I couldn't accept it that easily.

"But... if this notebook is a lie... If I can't trust my own notebook anymore... what is there left for me to believe in...?"

"Believe in me."

"Eh...?"

"Believe in me, and forget what's written there."

Had these been normal circumstances, my heart would probably leap at those words. But, that was impossible right now. There was a conflict inside my heart that overcame any heart throbbing. The only two certain things in my life clashed heavily, and I was swaying violently from the shock, as if I was a small boat caught in a storm.

"Ryouko Otonashi's Memory Notebook" was the one and only trusted route to my memories.

Matsuda-kun was the one and only existence connecting me to the rest of the world.

In other words, I had the ultimate choice in front of me. Should I believe in myself? Or should I believe in Matsuda-kun?

I finally reached a conclusion.

"In that case... always be by my side, Matsuda-kun. If you do... I can give away my memories..."

Matsuda-kun stayed quiet for a while under the bed. I waited, motionless. I waited until he gave me an answer. Then, he finally did.

"Right now... that's impossible."

But, it was the exact opposite of what I hoped for.

I was dumbfounded, and could only return an absent-minded question of my own.

"If not now... then when would it be possible?"



".....I don't know."

"Y...You... don't know?"

"Anyway, it's impossible right now. I can't be with you. There are other things I must do."

Things he must do? I guess, that must be...

"...I see. The most important thing to you is your research... Which means, no matter how much I choose you, you will not choose me back." All I could do now was grudgingly whisper those words of resentment.

"No, that's not it. I --" It seemed Matsuda-kun was about to say something, but he held his tongue at the last minute. He sank into silence, and said nothing more. It doesn't matter how much I wait, he is never going to say the words I yearn for.

"In that case... at least cure me..." My head felt hot, and my view of the ceiling got blurry. My face was probably covered in tears. Snot was probably gushing out of my nose. But, I couldn't stop the stream of emotions flowing out of me anymore.

"And if you can't cure me, at least make me forget about you too!" My screams were now mixed with sobbing, as I let everything out at once. "It hurts too much that you're the only thing I can remember! I'd rather not remember anything at all!"

The rope dug deeper into my body as I raged and loudly scraped my skin. Nevertheless, I couldn't even feel the pain and continued to scream.

"I've had it! Make me forget! Make me forget about you, Matsuda-kun!"

There was a rustling noise from under the bed. Then, Matsuda-kun rose up and stood by it. He was quiet, and looked down at me sobbing violently. Then, he quietly took a tissue out of his pocket and started wiping my face.

I gazed at him.

Almond eyes carved in the middle of a pale, unhealthy-looking face. Thin, black hair hanging down near the corners of the eyes. Long, feminine eyelashes. A pointed chin. Thin, small lips. Long, white fingers. That was Matsuda-kun.

But, his face... his face looked lonely.

He looked at me with lonely eyes, and gently wiped the tears and the snot off my face.

For some reason, I felt fear washing over my body. Fear stronger than any regret at the words I just said. Matsuda-kun --

Then, just as I was about to open my mouth again, Matsuda-kun's hand stopped moving. He quietly turned aside, and started walking toward his desk. Soon, he disappeared from my field of vision.

"M...Matsuda-kun..." I finally managed to speak again, but --

"...I have an appointment I have to go to." I could hear his voice from somewhere outside my field of vision. "I've been entrusted with the treatment of a certain student... I can't postpone it."

"...You're going?"

"I'll be back soon. We will continue this discussion then."

Soon, I could hear his footsteps walking away, and then the lonely sound of the door closing.

-- *He went away...*

Every bit of energy in my body faded out with a single ashen sigh. Then, I suddenly remembered the heavy pressure on my chest.

"He could've at least loosened the rope..."

My body was engulfed with fatigue, but the pain I felt wasn't the rope's fault. Its source was clear. I closed my eyes, trying to escape the anguish.

I wanted to fall asleep. I wanted to forget everything...

With that thought in mind, I slowly started dissolving my own consciousness away.

Slowly, slowly...

Suddenly, I felt the floaty feeling of my body being released.

-- *Huh?*

I gathered up my dissolved consciousness, and when I opened my eyes I discovered that the rope that had bound me was now untied.

"...Matsuda-kun?"

I rose up from the bed and looked around the laboratory, but there was no one there.

-- *So, how did the rope become untied?*

-- *So, how did the rope become untied?*

I wondered if it could have been a time-based mechanism, or if I could secretly be a talented escape artist. As I contemplated those possibilities I took a good look around the laboratory, and noticed a hot water dispenser on one of the tables.

I guess I should make myself some tea, to calm me down.

Soon after the idea came to my mind, I poured some boiling water into a small teapot. The fragrance of tea leaves tickled my nose. I poured myself a cup of tea, and slowly sipped a mouthful. The hot, strong liquid washed down from my gullet to my stomach... and I finally calmed down.

"I see you've finally calmed down."

".....Eh?"

A small boy I didn't recognize appeared out of nowhere, and was standing in front of me.

"KYAAAAAAAAA!" I dropped my teacup in surprise, and it hit me directly on the foot. "GYAAAAAAAAA!" I writhed from the sudden agony.

"Ha ha! You sure are a scatterbrain, sister!"

"Who... Who are you?!" I managed to ask the innocent-looking laughing boy through the pain.

"Hm? You've forgotten already? Didn't we just meet last night?"

-- *We met last night?*

I dragged along my foot, which was already numb with pain, and stepped to the bed where "Ryouko's Otonashi's Memory Notebook" was still lying. I picked it up and leafed through the pages.

"Ah, I see!" I suddenly remembered. "Could you be the boy I left a message to Matsuda-kun with at the dorms...?"

"Bingo! You're perfectly correct! I am Yuuto Kamishiro, a student in Hope's Peak Academy's 77th class!"

"Um... When did you come in here?" I asked. I mean, I didn't notice him entering at all!

"Well, it's natural that you didn't notice," Kamishiro-kun suppressed a giggle and sat down on top of the desk. "But, that's the wrong question to ask."

"...Eh? What do you mean?"

Kamishiro-kun's mouth twisted in a broad grin. "I didn't come in. I've been here all along."

"A...All along...?"

"Well, ever since Yasuke Matsuda tied you to the bed with that rope, at least. I heard every bit of that lover's quarrel you had after that, of course. Speaking of, that sure was one impressive knot he tied! I'll have to ask him to teach it to me some other time."

"Um... In other words..." I tried using every bit of my brain to make sense of the situation. "You've been hiding somewhere in the lab since the beginning, and peeped on what Matsuda-kun and I were doing?"

"How rude! I may be a pervert, but I'm not the kind of pervert who hides and peeks!" Kamishiro-kun puffed his cheeks. I wasn't sure why he was upset.

"But, if you weren't hiding, we would surely have noticed you... I mean, if not me, Matsuda-kun would've..."

"You still don't get it, do you? Very well, let me explain it directly." Kamishiro-kun suddenly thrust out his chest. "You didn't notice me because of my talent," he declared cheerfully. "I am a 'Super High-school Level Secret Agent', after all!" He puffed his chest even more, and soon looked as if he was bending over backwards.

"Super High-school Level... Secret Agent?"

"You know, like in '007' and 'Mission Impossible'... You must have seen one of these movies at some point. I'm just like that. A spy, if you will."

"A spy...?" Unfortunately, I had no memory of ever seeing either of the movies he mentioned, and couldn't quite grasp what he meant.

"As long as I can remember, people have been telling me how short and plain and insignificant I look." While speaking, he took out a large melon bread from somewhere -- honestly, it's a mystery where he could hide such a thing inside his outfit -- and continued, chewing loudly.

"When I was a child, I hated my lack of presence... but then I had a realization. This is not a disadvantage. Quite the opposite - it's an incredible talent! I mean, if you have no presence, no one's going to notice you! I could flourish as a spy or a ninja! Yep - it wasn't a fault at all. It was a talent bestowed upon me from heaven. If I use it, I could become a super-spy that saves the world! The kind that gets a license to kill!"

The second he finished talking, Kamishiro-kun stuffed the rest of the melon bread he still held in his hand into his mouth.

"In other words... you weren't hiding at all... but we simply couldn't notice you?"

Kamishiro-kun gulped down the bread in his mouth. "Yes, exactly!" he said, smiling widely. "At first, I came here in order to fulfill the promise I made to you yesterday. You know, the message I was supposed to pass. But when I got here I saw you and Matsuda-kun already found each other, so I thought the message wasn't necessary anymore. But, it was a waste to just go back home, so I thought I'd go and show off my talent."

"Show off your power..." I frowned. "But... why?"

"So I could help you with that incident you've gotten yourself involved with, of course!" Kamishiro-kun looked at me with passion-filled eyes that didn't match his boyish face at all. "Now that you've seen me do it, you get it, right? I can easily gather any information you require. I can solve any problem. The more dangerous the incident is, the more excited I get. That's just the type of man I am! Even if this turns out to be about a terrorist plan to steal a nuclear warhead... Ah! My body shivers just imagining that!"

Kamishiro-kun's body indeed shivered a little in excitement at his own words. His entire body oozed some strange kind of innocent madness.

"You're a strange one, aren't you..."

"Fair enough. If I wasn't, I wouldn't be in this school!"

He was right, of course. This *is* Hope's Peak Academy we're talking about -- I'm probably just as strange!



"So, what are you going to do, sister? I think your best course of action right now is to gain another ally. And not just a regular ally - I'm a specialist's specialist! A pro at intelligence gathering!" Kamishiro-kun pulled out another piece of pastry -- does his outfit *really* have the space to store that many? -- but his hand suddenly stopped before it entered his mouth. "What the...? This is butter peanut bread! What a disappointment!" His shoulders drooped, dejected.

"Is butter peanut bread really a disappointment? It sounds delicious to me..."

"What are you saying, sister?! Peanuts and bread are the worst possible combination! It's like trying to eat miso and rice together!"

I think that comparison made it even harder for me to understand, but I just said "Yeah, of course!". I didn't think it worth the bother of fighting over, so I decided to let it slide.

"Aha, so you *do* understand! Here, you can have it." Having cheered up, Kamishiro-kun handed me the sticky butter peanut bread, then anxiously thrust his hand into his shirt again and pulled out a new pastry. "Yes! A Yamazaki Madeira Cake!" It seems he hit the jackpot this time. His cheeks puffed and a wide smile appeared on his face as he started chewing the bread. "Fo, fwah aa foo foin' foo foo?"

"...Um, what did you just say?"

Kamishiro-kun swallowed the bread in his mouth. "So, what are you going to do?" he said, his eyes turning scarily serious as he gave me a questioning look. "That is, I think your only option is to let me help you. As far as I can tell, you're the type of person who can't do anything properly by herself, and all you've achieved so far is just wandering around in confusion. When you have plumbing problems you call a professional plumber, and when you've gotten involved in the kind of trouble you're in right now, you need a professional like me. I am exactly the kind of person who can clear up this kind of incident. Right now... we fit together like male and female genitalia. You're a confused person in trouble, and I'm a person who can solve such problems. It's easy to tell what the next step should be, isn't it? It's even more obvious than ejaculation."

"W...Wait a second!", I stopped his speech, confused.

"Hm? What's wrong?"

"Um... Didn't you break character a little bit just now?"

"Not really," he answered nonchalantly.

"I guess... I was just imagining it, then..." I thought I heard him pepper his speech with some inappropriate phrases -- but I must have just not been paying attention. I just heard him wrong. That must be it.

"So, have you decided what you're going to do yet? If you're just going to continue wandering around in confusion, your troubles are never going to get solved. I think your best course of action right now is to make the right decision and let *me* handle things."

"My troubles..." At this point, I had to read my notebook again in order to put my thoughts in order. I had already forgotten what the exact nature of the trouble I was involved in was. But, the moment I read the explanation my heart started palpitating at an unusually violent pace.

I closed the notebook in panic.

Oh my god! Oh my god! Oh my god! Oh my god! Oh my god!

It was unreasonable beyond unreason. It seems I've gotten involved in an abnormal situation to top all abnormal situations. I am pretty sure I won't find a way to handle such a situation inside "Ryouko Otonashi's Memory Notebook", no matter how much I search.

I don't have enough data --

And I definitely don't have enough experience --

Oh my god! Oh my god! Oh my god! Oh my god! Oh my god!

I raised my eyes in haste, and they met the eyes of the boy in front of me, who was still chewing some kind of pastry.

"It seems you made your decision."

"...Eh?"

"Well, then. I guess I'll have you tell me exactly how you got yourself involved in this incident now!"

It seems he could read something in my eyes, and was already ready to take over. He's right, though. There's probably nothing else I can do. If I can't take care of this myself, I have no choice but to rely on other people. Even I can understand such simple reasoning.

Other people. Other people who are not Matsuda-kun.

It seems the time has finally come to put myself in the care of people who had nothing to do with me until now.

"What are you waiting for? C'mon, let me hear all about it. Go on!"

"O...Okay..."

Urged by Kamishiro-kun, who acted like a dog craving pet food, I opened my notebook again. But, before I could explain about the trouble I was in, I had to explain to him about my "forgetfulness".

"...Huh. I can't say I'm jealous, but that is one interesting trait you have there." His face looked like he has just seen an unusual souvenir from some exotic foreign country.

I continued my story. I told him about the past memories that were stolen from me, about how I was invited to the central plaza and found a dead body there, about my meeting with Junko Enoshima --

The events I was reading in my notebook were enough to make my voice tremble, but Kamishiro-kun just listened attentively, narrowing his eyes. Then, as I completed the first part of the story and came to a pause, he finally spoke.

"...Hmmm. I never imagined I'd hear Junko Enoshima's name here..."

-- *Huh? I have a feeling I recently got the same kind of response from someone else...*

"Oh? Are you surprised I reacted to Junko Enoshima's name more than I did to the dead body? It was just the same with Matsuda-kun before. Ahaha, I guess you were right, sister - you really *are* forgetful! That's amazing!"

"...That's really not something you should admire, you know."

Kamishiro-kun pulled himself together in agreement. "Well, I think I get the general idea about your situation. I'm a super-spy so I don't get too shocked by dead bodies, but... this really is quite an incident you've gotten yourself involved with. And if that Junko Enoshima girl is connected to it... then it's probably also an especially atrocious situation. Yep, you were right when you decided to let me handle it."

"Do you, perhaps, know this Junko Enoshima?" I asked. He sure talked as if he did.

"Not directly, no. But I feel that she and I share a destiny. A stiff destiny."

"...Excuse me?"

"You sure had an experience straight out of Hollywood blockbuster, haven't you? No need to worry, though -- whoever the lead character was previously, I'm taking over that role now. This is going to be a thrilling spy-suspense story from now on!"

"Thrilling... that's an odd phrase to use for your own life..."

"Ahaha! You shouldn't think too hard about that!" Kamishiro-kun thrust his hand into his clothes again and pulled out yet another pastry. "Yay! A choco-swirl!" he cheered, and then returned to his explanation.

"I am currently investigating a different incident, you see, and that's where I heard the name 'Junko Enoshima'. At the time, I didn't think she was such an important key figure... But if she's also involved in *your* incident, I guess that changes the story. I mean, it would be too much of a coincidence for the same girl to be involved in two different incidents." Kamishiro-kun's eyes glittered. He was right when he said the more dangerous the incident the more excited he gets.

"By the way, aren't you curious what that other incident might be? Aren't you?!"

"Y...Yeah, I guess..." I reluctantly nodded in agreement, since he was pressing the question hard.

"Hmmm. Should I even tell you? It might be bad if word of this leaks out..." His attitude reeked of assumed importance despite the fact that it was him who brought the subject up in the first place. "Oh, who cares?" He dismissed his worries lightly, as I expected him to. This is a very tiresome person indeed!

"Actually... I'm not sure we should even call it a 'different incident'."

"...Eh? What do you mean?"

"I think the two incidents might be connected. That's what I mean."

Connected? The two incidents?

"By the way, I suggest you keep your mouth shut regarding that 'other incident'... It is quite a dangerous incident, and there's even a chance the worst might happen." Done with this preface, Kamishiro-kun started pacing around the room, as if he was a detective announcing the result of his investigation. "That 'other incident' I am talking about... is the incident that was given the codename 'The Worst, Largest Incident in Hope's Peak Academy's History'."

Suddenly, my heart started beating as if small bombs were going off inside it.

-- *Huh? What's going on?*

"The Worst, Largest Incident in Hope's Peak Academy's History" -- it was an absurd title straight out of fiction, and yet something inside me reacted to its mention. I felt as if a heavy load was suddenly pressing down on both my shoulders. My hand, which was flipping through the notebook as I read it over, came to a sudden stop.

"Hey, sister, what's wrong?" When I came back to myself, I found Kamishiro-kun staring intently at my face. "You seem to be in pain... Do you need Youmeishu or Kyushin or something?"

"N...No... I'm fine, it's nothing." I took a couple of deep breaths, and somehow managed to calm myself.

"In that case... aren't you curious to hear what kind of incident The Worst, Largest Incident in Hope's Peak Academy's History was? You must be, right? You must!"

"I...I guess..." He was pressing hard again, so I had to reluctantly agree for the second time.

"Well, you see..." Kamishiro-kun closed his eyes and raised both his hands. "I don't really know the exact details myself."

"Y...You don't know...?!" I complained. He was the one who raised the subject in the first place!

"Well, I know what the *rumors* are."

"Rumors...?"

"To tell you the truth, I've only heard rumors about the incident in question, and I'm still investigating whether it really happened or not. Right now, it's at the same level as the school's seven supernatural mysteries... Except that someone actually decided to name it 'The Worst, Largest Incident in Hope's Peak Academy's History'."

"I...I see..." So it's just a rumor. It was silly for me to be so nervous -- but, just as I was about to loosen my stressed shoulders --

"Hey, you shouldn't relax just yet." I felt as if Kamishiro-kun's narrow eyes looked down at me from above. "Even if it *is* a rumor, there's a good chance it might be true. And if it's true... it was one truly terrible incident. This is one bad rumor we're talking about. You really shouldn't relax just yet."

I didn't want to listen to him anymore. That was my honest, true feeling. Nevertheless, it seemed I was out of luck.

"But if you still want to hear all about it, I guess I have no choice! Here, listen!" He was already in full swing, engrossed in his own words. "You see, here's what 'The Worst, Largest Incident in Hope's Peak Academy's History' is all about..."

Kamishiro-kun coughed a small cough, and then stated theatrically: "Fifteen Hope's Peak Academy students suddenly disappeared, and thirteen of them were later found dead... That's 'The Worst, Largest Incident in Hope's Peak Academy's History'."

I was taken aback. It was too strange. Too bizarre. It didn't seem even a little real.

"But... that's just a rumor, isn't it?" I asked, seeking confirmation. Kamishiro-kun shook his head.

"Had I been sure it was just a rumor, I wouldn't be investigating it right now."

"B...But..."

"It seems there really are some students who disappeared," he whispered as if telling a secret. "About a month before the rumor started spreading, fourteen members of Hope's Peak Academy's student council were suddenly called to an overseas facility, and are now apparently studying abroad. Don't you think that's a little suspicious?"

"T...That's just a coincidence... Ah! The rumor said fifteen went missing, didn't it? The number doesn't fit at all! I guess it was just a rumor after --"

"Those are just details." Kamishiro-kun fluttered his hand. "I mean, it *is* just a rumor right now."

First he says it's just a rumor, than he scares me by saying it's real, and now he's going back. Is he doing this on purpose?

"...Well, whatever. How about we return to your problem, sister?"

"Eh? My problem?"

"Have you forgotten already? We were worried about how this Junko Enoshima is related to this incident."

I looked down at my notebook again. Oh, that's right! I remember! This strange rumor about dead students has nothing to do with me! What I should be worried about is this insane girl called Junko Enoshima that I encountered!

"So, aren't you curious? Aren't you curious about how Junko Enoshima is related to The Worst, Largest Incident in Hope's Peak Academy's History? That's where the reason she's after you might be hidden, after all! You're curious, aren't you!"

"Yeah! Please tell me!" I pressed the pressing Kamishiro-kun.

"Well, you see..." Kamishiro-kun smiled a wide smile. "I don't really know."

".....Huh?" A sudden dizziness grabbed me. "Y...You don't know... What the..."

I trembled in fear, but Kamishiro-kun was indifferent. He started pacing around the room again.

"But, about a month before the rumors of the incident started spreading, Hope's Peak Academy's executive office conducted an investigation regarding her. Don't you find that suspicious?"

"It's very suspicious!" I regained my posture and raised my voice in excitement. "If they investigated her, there's a good chance she's the culprit!"

"...Don't get excited so fast. We're still not even sure if the rumor is true."

He's right. As I made my hypothesis, I somehow convinced myself the incident really did happen.

"But... If this rumor *is* true... and if she *is* the culprit behind it... don't you think she would be caught by now if Hope's Peak conducted an investigation?" Kamishiro-kun leaned on a desk and continued. "Furthermore, it appears that it was Junko Enoshima herself who started the rumor about 'The Worst, Largest Incident in Hope's Peak Academy's History' in the first place."

"...Eh?"

"That makes it unlikely that she's the culprit. I mean... a culprit spreading a rumor about their own crime? That would be far too dangerous."

"But, is it really true? Was it really Junko Enoshima who started that rumor...?"

"The rumor started a few weeks ago when a cryptic email message describing the incident was sent to every student in Hope's Peak's preparatory school."

"And... was it Junko Enoshima who sent that email?"

Kamishiro-kun nodded as if he was swallowing something. "There's an underclassman of mine who's exceptionally good with computers and who I have monitor the school's servers for me now and then. That's how I found out about the email. There wasn't any sender name on it, of course, but I easily figured that out using my super-spy abilities. Oh, and just so you won't make any wrong assumptions, I never told that underclassman about the contents of the email or about the sender's identity. It would be very selfish of me to involve unrelated passers-by with dangerous incidents!"

I was just about to give a witty reply about how he's involving *me* with this incident, but decided at the last moment that it wasn't the place or time for that.

"But, why would Junko Enoshima do such a thing? Why spread a rumor about such an incident...?"

"That, I do not know", he proclaimed his ignorance in a bright voice yet again.



"Ah! How about we ask her directly?" I had a flash of inspiration. "Let's find Junko Enoshima and *ask* her what's going on!"

"If that was possible, I'd have done it already..." Kamishiro-kun shook his head in dismay. "I'm not sure why, but I can't manage to find this Junko Enoshima anywhere. She isn't going to any classes, and the teachers seem to allow it. Her classmates also have no idea what's going on... I'm telling you, that girl is allowed too much freedom. It's possible she's even been expelled, since even I can't locate her."

"But, I *did* meet her. Right here, in this school... That's what my notebook says."

"She probably wanted you involved in this, no matter the cost, sister. That's why she appeared before you, stole that notebook of yours and made that mysterious confession about a murder she had committed... But, I have no clue what her intentions are. It's so far out that all we can currently do is laugh about it. Kyahahaha!" Kamishiro-kun linked his arms behind his head and laughed naturally.

"Wait...! This isn't a time to laugh! This is serious!" I chided him in response.

"It's fine, it's fine. It's not like we're in any hurry," Kamishiro-kun replied, letting out a yawn. "The only reason we don't understand it yet is because my investigation is still going. As soon as I get back on the case, we'll know the rest of the details in no time. But right now, it's meaningless to make any hypotheses and conjectures. By which I mean, leave the rest to me!" Kamishiro-kun produced yet another pastry from somewhere, as if to signal that the conversation is done. "Ah! The legendary three-flavor danish!" He puffed his cheeks happily.

"Oh! I almost forgot," he suddenly turned back to me, licking the sugar off his fingers. "We haven't yet discussed the matter of remuneration, have we?"

"Eh? You want me to pay you?!"

"Ahaha! Don't worry, it's not money that I want... I am not asking for anything important, really."

"...Nothing important? So, do you want me to buy you some pastries...?"

"Pastries that can satisfy my appetite are extremely important!" He shook his head so vigorously I could almost hear the noise it was making.

"Um... so, what...?" I tilted my head in confusion.

"You see, I want you to let me do you a little," replied Kamishiro-kun with a big smile on his face.

"Do... eh? What?"

"Wasn't my voice clear enough? I said I want you to let me do you," he answered clearly, still smiling his wide smile.

"Oh, I see! You don't mean anything dirty, right? Sorry, sorry -- I got confused for a second. You said it was nothing important, after all, didn't you?" I scratched my head in embarrassment, but Kamishiro-kun returned a surprised look.

"So you put that much value on your own body, sister? That sure is a shocking revelation!"

"No, it's me who's shocked! In more ways than one!" I instinctively covered my face with my hands. Then, I peeked at Kamishiro-kun through my fingers and asked again. "S...So, by 'doing', you really do mean...?"

"Despite my looks, I have more sexual appetite than most men! Besides, it's a given in spy movies that the hero gets the girl after it's all over, and you have just the kind of lewd face that would make any man horny!" Kamishiro-kun puffed his chest in pride.

"That's not something you should puff your chest at!"

"Should I puff something else? In that case, how about you puff *your* chest, sister? Go on, it wouldn't hurt to try! C'mon, push out that plump bosom of yours! Hee hee hee..."

I could only shudder at his wicked smile, full of hidden intentions.

"U...Um... where did that pure, innocent boy disappear to...?"

"Hee Hee hee... Anyway, I am looking forward to dealing with this incident in more ways than one. I have just one request. Please stop taking baths from now on. I much prefer dirty bodies, if you know what I mean."

"There's really nothing left of your previous personality, is there...?" It was even more difficult than usual, hearing such words come out of this young boy's mouth.

"Well, then," ignoring my perplexion Kamishiro-kun clapped his hands loudly. "It seems we're in agreement regarding the remuneration, so it's time for me to begin!"

He jogged down to the door and waved his hand innocently. "See you later!" he shouted as if he was a small child going out to play, and then ran out of the lab.

"W...Wait a second...! I never agreed to anything...!"

The door slammed, stopping my call before it could reach its destination.

"I... never agreed to anything..." I muttered fruitlessly to myself as I sat down on the bed, exhausted. "B..But... it was only a verbal agreement..." I'm not even sure such a one sided agreement can really be called an agreement. I mean, no one asked him to come and stick his neck into my troubles, right? Furthermore, "*doing me*"? That was obviously entirely one sided! No feminist group is going to stay quiet if someone gets away with something like this!

And that's why --

-- it really has nothing to do with me.

"Yep. I should just ignore it. It's best to just ignore it." I lay down on the bed, muttering in desperation, when suddenly --

I heard the lab's door opening again. I thought Kamishiro-kun might have heard my mutterings and came back, so I rose up in panic, but --

My heart jumped at the sight of the slender, fair-skinned man at the door.

"Ah! Matsuda-kuuuuuuun!" I jumped like a sprinter straight into his chest. "You're late! I've been waiting for so long...!"

The body I was embracing was awfully stiff.

"Huh? Is something wrong?"

"I should ask you the same thing... don't you want to continue our conversation from before...?"

"...Eh? What conversation?" I had no clue what he was talking about. I had already forgotten it. But I didn't care.

I don't know what happened before. As long as Matsuda-kun is here, everything is fine.

"Did we talk about something before...?" I tilted my head and then buried my face deep inside his chest. "Purrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrr..." My head remained buried in that chest for a while. I thought he would chastise me for getting him dirty -- but instead, he finally said two unexpected words.

"I'm sorry..."

"Eh?", I raised my head in surprise. "What... are you sorry about?"

Matsuda-kun stared at my face for a short while, and then coughed a small cough.

"No, it's fine if you don't remember. But in any case, I'm sorry," he said, bashfully turning his face away. I didn't understand exactly what he was saying -- but for some reason my chest tightened with deep emotions replacing the thunderous beating of my heart. I buried my face deep in his chest again.

And as I stand there, swallowed inside his chest, I start forgetting.

All the dirt and filth that clung to the inside of my body crumbles into nothingness, leaving nothing but a pure, empty feeling. Nothing matters except this very moment, right now.

I'm a little worried about his sudden apology, but even that is not such a big deal compared to this moment's happiness.

Right now. This very moment. That's the only important thing in the world.

I don't know about anything but this moment. Nothing exists for me except this moment. This moment won't even turn into a memory.

And that's why I have to treasure this moment's happiness.

"...By the way, what happened to the rope?" I suddenly heard Matsuda-kun's voice from somewhere above my head.

"...What rope?"

"You don't even remember how you escaped that knot?"

"No, I'm sorry..."

"I really can't leave you alone for a second, can I..."

"I'm sorry..."

Matsuda-kun shook his head and sighed, but his face had a happy expression on it.

"By the way... it's starting to hurt."

"Oh, c'mon... just a little longer..." I pleaded like a spoiled child. MatHe was right, of course. This is Hope's Peak Academy we're talking about -- I'm probably just as strange!suda-kun gave up with a sigh and then slowly let his body relax.

As I felt his body growing softer, I was immersed in a feeling of satisfaction and achievement, as if at that moment I could grasp the entire world inside my fist.

-- *This is my world.*

-- *This alone is my world.*

I closed my eyes, a feeling of euphoria flooding over me. I could hear the beating of his heart inside his chest. That constant beat was the final blessing for me, the girl who has just gotten everything she ever wanted inside her hands.

"The parade..." whispered Matsuda-kun suddenly.

"...Hm? Did you say something?" I replied, keeping my eyes closed.

"Somehow... the parade is growing louder again outside..."

I tried listening, but--

*Thump, thump.*

I couldn't hear anything but the beating of his heart.

-- *There's no one here except for me and Matsuda-kun.*

-- *Nothing other than that has anything to do with me.*

And right now --

-- There wasn't even anything left to say anymore.

I spent some time buried in my beloved Matsuda-kun's chest. Then, I reluctantly parted with my beloved Matsuda-kun and returned to my room that didn't have my beloved Matsuda-kun in it. I thought of my beloved Matsuda-kun as I took off my shoes, I whispered my beloved Matsuda-kun's name as I climbed into bed, and then I drifted into sleep, where dreams of my beloved Matsuda-kun awaited me.

That's all there is to it. Nothing else has anything to do with me anymore.



## **CHAPTER 13**

The courtyard at Hope's Peak Academy's eastern quarter, deep at night.

The lights from the surrounding facilities were long gone. Only the street lamps, installed at fixed intervals, still dimly illuminated the darkness.

In front of the clock tower on the edge of the courtyard stood a teenage girl, alone. She narrowed her eyes and looked at the clock above her head.

"He should be here soon," she whispered.

The girl was waiting for someone.

When she first contacted the man, he coldly refused to meet her, insisting that it wasn't necessary. But once she'd procured documents concerning shady deals in his past, she found him much more open to the suggestion. It wasn't hard -- after all, she made her livelihood discovering people's secrets. In fact, she thought this one had given up a little *too* easily. What else was he hiding...?

-- *Fame is a fickle food...*

-- *You work so hard to get it, and all it gets you is your freedom lost...*

The man she was waiting for was a member of Hope's Peak Academy's steering committee.

There was a reason she had to meet a member of the committee. There was something she had to ask directly, whatever the cost. There was a certain truth that the committee were earnestly trying to hide. A truth even her client -- Hope's Peak Academy's headmaster -- most likely did not know. The only avenue of investigation was to question a committee member directly.

She had come to that important realization only a few short days after setting out on her investigation. Her formidable talent led her to it.

Her name was Kyouko Kirigiri.

She was a student in Hope's Peak Academy's 78th class, and bore the title of "Super High-school Level Detective".

And right now, she was employed by Hope's Peak's headmaster to investigate a certain incident.

"He sure is late..." she whispered, looking up at the clock tower once more.

Five minutes late.

-- *I should have asked him to be strictly on time...*

The wrinkles on her forehead deepened. But the moment she lowered her eyes from the clock, they disappeared. She saw a figure of a man in the distance.

The figure glanced around, seemingly on guard, then proceeded slowly toward where she was standing. His features slowly became clearer. He was an elderly man wearing a pitch-black suit and a matching pitch-black necktie, as if he was on the way back from a funeral. His grizzled hair was unnaturally stiff with pomade, and seemed almost artificial.

As the man came closer, his face also revealed itself. His brow was covered with deep wrinkles that seemed to be chiseled directly into his skull. The sunken eyes below them glared at Kyouko with a disgusted expression.

The distance between the two narrowed, and finally, when there were only three meters separating them, the man stopped.

"...Was it you who called me here?" The man opened his small, straight mouth and raised the question in a severe tone of voice. "What is it you wa --"

But, his words were cut short.

Something absurd, something completely out of place, came falling down from the sky --

-- and both the man and his words --

-- were flattened by it.

Kyouko felt as if the scene before her was a stop motion animation --

-- as though she was witnessing a series of ridiculous tableaux.

The school desk that came flying down from the sky hit the man directly on the head.

The man's body twisted from the impact, and then collapsed. The desk struck the ground and then bounced back into the air in recoil. At that point, another desk came flying down from above. It smashed into the fallen man's back, bending his body like a trampled ragdoll. Then, yet another falling desk twisted his neck unnaturally. The man's face showed no sign of surprise. It was stuck in the same expression he had when he talked to Kyouko. Then, several more flying desks hid his body, making a huge cloud of dust as they hit the ground.

An overdue intense crashing noise finally registered in Kyouko's ears. At the same time, a desk came shooting out from inside the cloud of dust, grazed her hair, and landed behind her, revolving like a spinning top.

It was a freakish development.

A development with no rhyme or reason.

The man who moments ago stood in front of Kyouko had been crushed by a large number of falling school desks as soon as he opened his mouth. It all took place in the span of a few seconds.

It took Kyouko only a brief moment to regain her senses. The dust cloud was still rising in the air when she took off running up to the desk pile. There was already a deep-red puddle next to the man, who was now buried under the rubble. Dark liquid seeped from his eyes, nose and ears.

Kyouko's mind quickly changed course. She turned her head to look above her.

A vague silhouette stood atop the school building, slowly coming into focus. It was a human figure, illuminated by moonlight from behind. The figure brandished *something* above its head... and then threw it.

It was a pipe chair, and it was flying down straight towards Kyouko.

She jumped aside, dodging the chair's trajectory, and leaped into the school building. Yet another crashing noise came from behind her. She assumed a low posture as she ran through the building's corridors, and then continued to run up the stairs without stopping to catch her breath. At that moment, she didn't care at all that she had just been targeted. She was running purely for the sake of the clue, in an adrenaline rush that erased any sense of danger from her mind.

Then, in no time at all, she reached the landing at the top floor and found the remains of a padlock lying on the floor in front of the door that led to the roof.

-- *This school should really consider buffing up security.*

She grabbed the doorknob, muttering cynically. The feeling of cold metal reached her fingertips. She squeezed the knob and pushed. The door opened easily and noiselessly.

She immediately felt the strong, cold night wind blowing past her body.

She took a single cautious step into the doorway, and quickly looked around the roof, dimly illuminated by starlight. There was no one there.

She walked around the concrete floor, thoroughly checking the area near the door and every other place where a person could conceivably be hiding in the shadows. Nevertheless -- she couldn't find anybody.

*-- I just missed them.*

A feeling of despondency assailed her, and she leaned her back on the iron fence surrounding the roof. Then, she looked up at the sky and quietly grumbled to herself.

"This is why I hate missing person cases..."

Suddenly, a cold shiver ran past her back. Something wasn't right. She quickly turned over, pushed her body over the railing and looked down into the courtyard. Her face caught the cold night wind, and her expression quickly turned grave serious.

She could see the wreckage of school desks and pipe chairs near the clock tower. But there was something missing.

The body that should have been there -- wasn't.

Kyouko's teeth chattered from the cold as she pulled her cell phone from an inner pocket. Just as she was about to push the call button, a hint of hesitation appeared on her face.

Nevertheless, her finger soon pushed the button.

After a couple of rings, she heard a man's voice.

"Are you free right now?" Kyouko asked, skipping a greeting. "There's something I want to report directly. I'm coming over."



## **CHAPTER 14**

It was a few minutes after Kyouko Kirigiri had disappeared from the roof.

*Bzzzzzzzzzzzt.* A strange sound, as if the very air was being torn, echoed through the east quarter's courtyard.

"Zap! Zap! Taser-gun!" exclaimed the high school girl, touting a pistol-shaped object high over her head. Her eyes were focused on the two guards lying in a pile on the floor, collapsed. They were both lying face down, and each had a small, thin needle sticking out of their back. A wire ran from each needle to the pistol in the girl's hand.

"Take that!" she cried and pulled the trigger.

*Bzzzzzzzzzzzt.*

The bodies of the two men, who were already unconscious, shook and spasmed along with the violent noise.

"...Ha ha!"

An ecstatic expression appeared on the girl's face as she watched them.

Junko Enoshima --

She had no makeup on, looked as if she had just woken up from sleep, and kept yawning big yawns. The pistol she held in her hand was a taser gun, a powerful self-defense weapon. It was a type of a stun gun - by shooting some target with a needle connected to a wire, she could send an electric current through the target's body. It wasn't originally strong enough to kill a person, but since she'd modified it to send a stronger current it wouldn't be so strange if someone *did* die.

A despair-inducing self-defense weapon.

One might say it made her unbeatable.

Junko Enoshima continued playing with the taser gun for a short while, but soon grew tired of it. She pulled the wires away with her bare hands, and threw them into a plastic bag. Then, she nonchalantly dumped the bag into a nearby trash can.

"Well, then. I think that took care of every annoying person in my way. It seems that Little Miss Kindaichi also disappeared to who knows where... Upupu... Does that mean I have the place all to myself?"

She let out a theatrical sigh of relief, and walked majestically across the plaza. Her destination was the clock tower. She didn't attempt to hide herself at all. Quite the opposite - she exhibited a sense of presence that seemed to scream at people to look at her. It also had the sinister suggestion that by doing so they might end up dead.

"That said, I never expected Little Miss Conan to stick her nose into my business. It must be that pesky headmaster's meddling... But, my plans for this scenario don't include her at all, so what am I to do? I mean, it *is* interesting to have her around, but it's also possible she'll be a real hindrance after I went through all that effort to -- Hey, waitwaitwaitwaitwait?"

She stopped abruptly, as if about to trip forward, and stared at the wreckage of school desks and pipe chairs in front of her. The moment she saw it, the cruel smile that was plastered on her face disappeared.

"...The body isn't here," she spat out. "Again...? This sure is despair-inducing... As despair-inducing as all your dreams crumbling down..."

Nevertheless, there was a smile on her face.

Smiling, she kicked the pipe chair that was lying on the ground near her feet. It didn't seem like a very powerful kick, but the chair flew a few meters, hit a street lamp that was in its way, and shot off into the air like a ping-pong ball.

Then, when the sound of the clash's echo disappeared from the plaza --

-- Junko Enoshima's figure was already gone, vanished like a shadow.





## **CHAPTER 15**

-- *What was that noise?*

Kyouko Kirigiri instinctively stopped moving. She thought she'd heard a sound like a bell clanging, but when she listened attentively the corridor was as still and silent as ever.

-- *Did I imagine it?*

Usually, she would have stopped and investigated until she could tell for sure, but right now she had something far more important to do. And so, she took off quickly toward her destination.

Kyouko walked briskly down a corridor of Hope's Peak Academy's staff building, a place students are normally forbidden to enter. The sound of her footsteps echoed coldly through the dim corridor. There was no sign of people in the staff building this late at night - she hadn't passed anyone on the way here, and she most likely wouldn't pass anyone going forward.

She reached her destination in no time at all.

A plaque reading "Headmaster's Office" adorned the door in front of her eyes. Kyouko glared at it for a moment, and then pushed the door open without knocking.

"You're already here. That was fast," said Jin Kirigiri, who was sitting at a desk deep inside the office. He was smiling.

Kyouko surveyed the room quickly, as was her habit when entering an unfamiliar place. Her first and only impression was "it's dirty." Cardboard boxes and documents were piled everywhere without rhyme or reason.

"...I've been too busy since we moved here, so I haven't had time to put things in order," said Kirigiri, having noticed where Kyouko was looking. Nevertheless, Kyouko's reply was surly and indifferent. She moved straight on to the subject at hand, indicating no interest in small talk.

"I just came from meeting a member of the steering committee, but someone got in our way." Kirigiri was about to say something in surprise, but Kyouko quickly continued as if to say it was not yet time for such a reaction. "He was killed. In front of my eyes."

"...K...Killed?"

"But, his body disappeared soon after that..."

"...Disappeared?" Despite only managing to repeat her words, Kirigiri's face grew deeply concerned. Nevertheless, Kyouko didn't seem to take notice, and continued speaking in the same indifferent tone.

"But, don't you think that's strange? They killed him as if trying to show off in front of me, and then they took the body away, like they wanted to hide it... If they wanted to show off, what purpose does hiding the body serve? I have a bad feeling about this." Kyouko seemed to be getting more and more passionate as she went on, and spoke faster and faster. "Furthermore, didn't another committee member go missing yesterday? He may also be in danger. We should find a way to contact and warn him. No, not just him - the whole committee is also --"

"W...Wait a moment!" Kirigiri couldn't take it anymore, and rose up from his chair. "A...Are you sure he was dead...?"

Kyouko said nothing, but her grim face was all the answer he needed. Kirigiri felt an intense feeling of exhaustion taking over his body and sank back into his chair. "Why would... such a thing...?" He heard Kyouko letting out a long, slow sigh in response to his question.

"...I'm not sure about the hiding, but I have a guess as to why he was killed."

"Y...You do?" Kirigiri slapped his hands on the desk, and looked energized again. "Tell me. Why?"

Watching him, Kyouko felt a sense of disappointment washing over her. Her emotion was reflected in her eyes, which seemed to be asking why he couldn't even figure that out on his own. Worse, he didn't even notice *that*.

"...Please. Tell me."

Kyouko sighed another deep sigh and answered quietly. "Making that big of a show when killing someone can only mean it's a warning... and if that's the case, killing a member of the steering committee is surely in response to 'that incident'."

Jin Kirigiri gulped loudly. "So you... know about that already? About the Worst, Largest Incident in Hope's Peak Academy's History..."

"To a certain extent."

Contrasting Kyouko's calm answer, Kirigiri's face turned sour.

"I see..." he spat out, and slowly leaned back into his chair. Then, after blinking several times in an attempt to regain his composure, he asked her another question.

"Are you saying he was killed because we are covering up the existence of that incident?"

"No, there's more to it than that." Kyoko shook her head lightly. "The steering committee hasn't just been covering up the existence of the incident. They've been hiding something else. Something important. I think *that's* why he was killed."

Kirigiri's expression turned thoughtful in an instant. Then, he whispered quietly. "Perhaps... is it because the committee knows the identity of the culprit and are harboring them?"

Kyouko's eyebrows raised slightly in reaction. "You... know about that?" For the first time since she entered the room, her eyes met Kirigiri's. "I never thought you knew about the culprit conspiracy. I didn't think you'd give me this job if you did... But... I guess you're in on it after all." Her words carried a hint of anger.

"No, that's not it." Kirigiri shook his head, flustered. "I was never told about the culprit, or the plan to harbor them. The committee decided that all on their own. I didn't hear about it from them - I did my own little investigation."

Kyouko's frown grew deeper. "You... did your own investigation?"

"That's not *that* strange, is it?" Kirigiri smiled a bitter smile. "I can manage that much when my mind's on it. I mean, I *do* have the blood of a detective family running through my --"

"Enough!" Kyouko's voice suddenly rose. Kirigiri raised his head in surprise, and found her glaring at him. She wasn't even trying to hide the anger boiling up inside her, and it was reflected in her eyes. She wasn't angry at her employer or her headmaster. She was angry at her detested father.

"Don't even dare joking about that!"

And that's why --

"I'm sorry."

-- He had no choice but to apologize.

"...That was thoughtless of me." He bowed his head deeply.

His circumstances didn't matter. His own feelings didn't matter. From her point of view, he was simply a man who abandoned his family. That much was unquestionable. He didn't want to make any excuses. It's not like he could, anyway.

But, perhaps, some day, he could at least convey his own feelings to her --

-- *No, those are just selfish thoughts.*



"...Forget it." He raised his head at her voice. She was leaning on a bookshelf in the corner of the room, and her expression was back to its calm self. "We've gotten off topic." Her voice was cool and composed.

"I'm sorry, you're right..." He let out a deep sigh. But, just as he was about to let his attention relax, two words assaulted him, as if in a surprise attack. They were cold, sharp words that seemed to pierce the air.

"It was *Izuru Kamukura*... wasn't it?"

Kirigiri reacted instinctively. His eyes, his fingertips, his breath... Kyouko did not miss his reaction.

"...So it was..."

His entire body was arrested by the look she gave him. He remembered that look. No, he couldn't just *remember* it - she had the eyes of a detective family. The eyes he hated and feared. The eyes that could pierce anyone's inner thoughts, creep through their minds and leave nothing unrevealed.

His own daughter giving him this awe-inspiring look... Kirigiri's frown loosened, just a little.

-- *As expected from a heir to the Kirigiri family!*  
-- *Such outstanding talent!*

"...Is something funny?" Kyouko asked, watching his face, as if taking him to task.

"No, I was just admiring you." The smile hasn't left Kirigiri's face. "I instructed you to find Izuru Kamukura, and in such a short time you have not only discovered the existence of the Worst, Largest Incident in Hope's Peak Academy's History, but also guessed correctly that Izuru Kamakura was responsible for it... That is amazing." He spoke fast, in excitement.

"Well, then. How about you tell me the rest? Who *is* Izuru Kamukura? I can't even tell if it's a man or a woman by that name alone..."

Kirigiri shook his head. "I told you before. I can't tell you that." The smile disappeared from his face.

"...I see. Fine, then." Kyouko was quickly getting ready to leave, as if to say she'd find out herself regardless. She looked at her feet and continued in her disinterested tone. "...But, I don't understand this at all. Why would you ask me to find Kamukura for you if you know he's the culprit? Aren't you trying to cover up this incident? If so, you should just let the committee shelter Kamukura, and do nothing."

"No, I can't just leave it up to them."

"Oh?" Kyouko's mouth twisted unnaturally. "So, you don't trust them either?"

"No, that's not it." Kirigiri's voice turned cold. "It's just that I don't think they know what they're doing. I think... they're making a big mistake."

"A mistake?"

"They think that if they can cover up this incident, it's all over... But I don't think that's true."

Kyouko listened carefully to Kirigiri's explanation without interjecting.

"*That incident* is not yet over. I feel like something is still going on somewhere out there... I hope it's just my imagination, but if it isn't, this may turn into something we can't undo. That's why I must hear what Izuru Kamukura has to say. But, the committee isn't revealing where Kamukura is. They don't trust me."

"....."

Something bothered Kyouko. It had less to do with what he was saying, and more with his demeanor as he was telling her about his fear that the incident was far from over. His tone of voice and gestures were certainly grave, but that was not all. She felt just a tiny hint of a different emotion hidden in them.

She suddenly remembered her grandfather.

Kyouko's grandfather, Jin Kirigiri's father, was still the head of the Kirigiri family, on active duty as a detective. She remembered her first accomplishment as a detective. She was officially acting as an assistant on the case, but was successful beyond anyone's imagination. Her grandfather, being her guardian at the time, had been observing her closely. She remembered him narrowing his eyes without saying a word, the expression on his face going far beyond simple joy or excitement.

She thought her father's expression now resembled her grandfather's expression then.

But she didn't dare say a word. It would be an insult to her grandfather, who she revered.

"...Is something wrong?"

The question made her realise she's been quiet for a while.

"It's nothing." Kyouko pulled herself together, softly brushing away a strand of hair. "Fine. I understand why you asked me to search for Kamukura now. In short, you couldn't do it yourself without drawing the committee's attention." Then, she pointed her piercing eyes toward Kirigiri again. "But, are you sure it was a good idea to confide in me?"

Kirigiri's expression turned worried. "...What do you mean?"

"I told you from the very beginning, didn't I? The steering committee is being targeted because they're sheltering the incident's culprit, which means..."

"...The culprit is someone who is searching for Kamukura --" Kirigiri suddenly realised what he was saying, and a stiff smile appeared on his face. "In that case, what you're trying to say is that I am a suspect."

"That's right. Although I already know it's not you." Kyouko folded her arms in front of her chest. "Right after the body disappeared, I made a phone call to this room... You answered straight away, so unfortunately, you have an alibi."

"Unfortunately'? That's a bit much, isn't it?" Kirigiri's stiff smile turned into a bitter one.

"Furthermore, don't you think you have other reasons to worry? When I find Izuru Kamukura... what if I decide to call the police before coming to you?"

"No, I'm not worried about that at all." Kirigiri answered, as if mocking the suggestion. "Much as the law is important to the police, the most important thing to a detective is the client. As long as you are a Super High-school Level Detective, you will not break our deal." *Even if you really detest your employer*, he thought to himself.

"Is that why you hired me? You thought it would be bad if I came sniffing about the incident on my own, so you thought you'd keep me quiet by giving me a job?" Her words were tinted with emotion. Kyouko herself felt that. She immediately regretted saying them.

"If that's what my words implied, I apologize. The only reason I hired you is because I needed your talent. I had no ulterior motives."

He chose his words carefully. It was clear that he was worried, and that made Kyouko even angrier. She was also mad at herself for letting him get to her. She thought she had put it all behind her - she wasn't supposed to feel anything for her father anymore. She wasn't even supposed to resent him. That's why she accepted the job - It was supposed to be just like any other case. So why was she choosing such sharp words every time she spoke? It was like --

-- *I'm like a spoiled child, looking for attention.*

"I've had enough of this idle chatter," she said in a strained voice, trying to rid the thought from her head. "In any case, we can't have any more victims. I think it's a good idea for you to warn the rest of the committee members. Tell them if they continue to harbor Izuru Kamukura, it's likely more people are going to end up dead."

"Yes, of course..." They both knew the committee were unlikely to listen, but neither of them said it out loud. They both knew it would be useless to mention it.

"...I'll be going now." Kyouko turned her back on Kirigiri without giving him another look. She was on her way to the door when an unexpected voice came from behind her back.

"This job turned out much more dangerous than I imagined..."

Kyouko stopped in her tracks. "So?" She turned her head back. "I am a detective. Heir to the Kirigiri family."

"...I thought that's what you'd say."

Kyouko sensed those words were leading to another unwanted emotion, and started moving quickly to the door again. When she reached for the doorknob, her father spoke again behind her.

"The preparatory school's 'parade' is growing more radical by the day..." His voice was unusually tense. "I feel the timing is too perfect. It can't be unrelated to *that incident*. What I'm trying to say is..." Kirigiri cleared his throat, and changed to a natural tone of voice.

"...Be careful."

He sounded like a father talking to his daughter before she went out for the evening. Nevertheless, Kyouko's reaction was a blunt one. That is to say, she didn't react at all. She just kept silent as she left the headmaster's office.

After hearing the door close loudly, Kirigiri let out a deep sigh and leaned back into his chair, but his face showed a hint of a smile.

-- *That truly is one incredible talent she has.*

He whispered those words inside his heart, and the smile on his face grew wider.

After leaving the headmaster's office, Kyouko walked back through the corridors as fast as when she arrived. Her face was emotionless.

Then, without changing her expression, she suddenly whispered.

"...He didn't have to say that. I *know* already."

The whisper only she herself could hear soon vanished into the air. And then, she herself vanished too, deep into the dark corridors.



## **CHAPTER 16**

And so, after everything that's happened, I, Ryouko Otonashi, and Yasuke Matsuda-kun made the decision to drop out and put Hope's Peak Academy behind us.

Right now we are waiting for our flight at the airport lobby. Soon, we will both board an airplane and embark on our trip to America, the land of the free. I have finally realized what's important. As long as I have Matsuda-kun in my world, I don't need to fuss over such trifling matters as Hope's Peak Academy. I have no obligation to participate in this irrational story. If you happen to be interested in what happens next, by all means - go ask someone else. We're busy. After we get to America, we're going to develop a new species of corn at a corn plantation, and then go to NASA and work on relocating to the moon.

"Hey, Matsuda-kun!" I say, turning towards Matsuda-kun who is already hard at work growing corn under the seat next to me.

"Hey, we're not at the plantation yet! Isn't this too early?"

"Don't interfere! I'm busy planting the Saibamen!" he replies while planting some seeds in the ground.

"Y...You can't, Matsuda-kun! Saibamen require richer soil to grow! Nappa-sama is going to be so upset!" But he is not listening to my advice and *bang bang bang bang*--

I opened my eyes.

I raised my body up wearily, and took a look around the room. A beige carpet. A small dresser. Empty bookshelves. Here and there, small notes reading "This is my room" were pasted on the wall. Since they were there I knew that this was, indeed, my room.

I gave a sigh of relief -- and then realized I didn't have time for that.

*Bang bang bang bang bang*. Someone was knocking violently on my door, as if trying to bring it down.

"I...I'm coming, just a minute..."

*Bang bang ba-ba-bang!*

*Bang-ba-bang-bang! Bang-ba-bang-bang!*

Not only didn't they wait, they also started knocking in a strange rhythm. I sulked, crawled out of bed, and then realized I had been sleeping with my shoes on. "Hm?" I thought as I removed them, picked up the notebook that was lying next to the pillow, and rushed to the door.

"...Who is it?" I unlocked the door, then opened it softly.

"Yooooohooooo!" A blond girl in loud makeup peeked vigorously through the gap.

"Waaah!" I reacted in surprise.

"Hey, hey! How much longer were you planning to sleep? It's noon already, y'know! What are you, a giant?!"

"...Huh?"

"Oh, wait. Sleepy was a *dwarf*, wasn't he. Sorry, my bad!"

I opened my notebook to check who this mysterious person who didn't seem to care about the proper way to start a conversation was, but--

"Oh? Have you forgotten about me? Let me tell you, then. My name's Junko Enoshima-chan! AKA 'Super High-school Level Fashion Girl!'"

Junko Enoshima, huh? I hurried and looked for memories of her in my notebook. Soon, alarms started going off inside my head. That's right... This is the girl who called herself a murderer and tried to get me involved in something I absolutely mustn't get involved in!

"G...Go awaaaaaaaay!" I screamed as if my brain was coming to a boil. I closed the door in a panic, but she had already forced her foot through the gap in the style of a door-to-door salesman, and stopped me from doing so.

"Oh? Are you, perhaps, thinking you can run away? That kind of attitude's just gonna hurt my feelings, y'know."

"I...I don't care! Just go awaaay!" I used my entire body's strength in an attempt to push the door close, but it didn't budge.

"Ding dong! Eureka, I got it! You think I'm a strange girl, don't you? You think there's a screw loose in my head, don't you? Could it be you don't even want to hear what I have to say? Is your conviction that strong? In that case, BIG SHOCK!" Enoshima-san opened her eyes wide and spread both her arms forward as she said the last two words.

"W...What the...?!"

"Eh? Don't you think it's funny? I was so sure I could make a fad out of this expression... BIG SHOCK!"

She seems to live in a different dimension than me -- I'm the one who should be in Big Shock right now!

"...No, that's not it. I meant, what do you want from me?!"

"Well, we can't stay here at the door all day, so... 'scuse me, coming in!" She pushed the door open with what seemed to be the strength of a hundred men, and invaded my room.

"Noooooooooooo!" I tried to escape deeper into the room but Enoshima-san managed to reach and grab me by the back of my neck. "....fugyuu!"

"This isn't the time for you to be running away, is it? Aren't I the grand thief who stole away your precious notebooks? Don't you hate me? Don't you just despise me?"

"I...I don't care anymore... I don't need those old memories anymore! I mean, it's not like I can remember any of them!"

I struggled violently and somehow managed to shake her hand off. Then, I jumped into my bed as fast as I could, covered my entire body, head to toe, with the blanket, and yelled a plea. "Just leave me alone! Don't involve me in whatever it is you do! It has nothing to do with me!"

Then--

"Oh? So you're going to lock yourself in your own little world..." I heard Enoshima-san's indifferent voice through the blanket. "But, that would mean you're going to just let Yasuke Matsuda die... are you really okay with that?"

In a second, my sunken emotions poured out all at once, and spread all the way to my chest.

"W...What did you just say?! Are you going to do something to Matsuda-kun?!" I shot like a bullet from under the blanket and hurried toward Enoshima-san.

Then, something unexpected happened.

Smiling, Junko Enoshima-san... hugged me.

"...Huh?"

I was still dumbfounded when she began whispering in my ear.

"Yes, that's good. You should hate me so much you'd want to kill me. The more you despise me, the more despair-inducing this story's ending is going to get... and that would be *perfect*."

"W...Wait...! Let me go...!"

"Hate me, despise me, fight me... Tear off that shell of yours, and let your true self reveal itself. This is not the time to lock yourself inside your own world. Let us give birth to a new you. It may hurt right now, but there's no need to worry. These are just birth pains. When you overcome them, it would finally be time to say happy birthday to your true self...!"

I took a bite into Enoshima-san's ear.

"Owowowowowow!"

As she faltered, I jumped out of her grip. "G...Give me a break! Why do I have to get involved with something like that...?! It has nothing to do with me!"

"Ha ha! Whether you have or don't have anything to do with it has nothing to do with it!" She stroked her bitten ear and turned to me, an ecstatic smile on her face. "Traffic accidents, natural disasters, wars... do you even realize how many people in this world lose their lives to things that have nothing to do with them?"

"B...But..."

"It's just the same! Well, at least it's the same to me!"

I started praying. *Dear god, please listen to my prayer. Please drop a meteorite on this girl's head right now. If you do, I will revere you for the rest of my life, right after Matsuda-kun!*

"Besides, you have *everything* to do with it. You only say you don't because you simply don't remember."

"...Huh?" My prayer was instantly swallowed by intense bewilderment. "What... has something to do with me?"

"Hm? It's obvious, isn't it?" Enoshima-san arbitrarily lowered her voice and declared. "The Worst, Largest Incident in Hope's Peak Academy's History. You are *deeply involved* with it."

I quickly turned to consult Ryouko Otonashi's Memory Notebook -- but Enoshima-san grabbed my hand.

"L...Let me go...!"

"Did you really think the things you can't remember are worthless and meaningless? If you did, you really *are* a dummy." She smiled a faint smile and drew closer. "You see, it doesn't matter how much you forget. Your actions are not going to disappear. Their effects are still felt right now in that world you've forgotten about."

"W...What are --?"

"What, did it never cross your mind? Did you never imagine decisions you had made ended up hurting and tormenting people?"

"T...That's not..."

"It's a cruel world out there, but it's the one we live in. People are intertwined in ways much more complex than you have ever imagined. A single person's actions may save the entire world... A single person's actions may cause a chain of despair that throws the world into chaos... Heh heh, isn't that amazing? Truly, this is a world worthy of being lived in!"

It was such worthless, silly logic that I felt embarrassed just listening to it.

But... there was something there.

Somewhere deep inside my heart I found myself agreeing with her words.

"...Do you get it now? In that case, let's return to the conversation's starting point." Enoshima-san crossed her arms. "I'm going to talk fast, so pay attention. You most certainly are involved with The Worst, Largest Incident in Hope's Peak Academy's History, but I assume your next question is 'exactly how am I involved?', isn't it?"

"T...This is going too quickly..."

"I'll tell you, then!" She ignored me and continued. "That is, I can't really tell you."

"Which is it?!" I wished she would at least be clear on this point.



"I mean, it's boring if I tell you right now... at least, that's what I think. That's why you should find out on your own exactly what's your involvement with the incident is... I think that's the kind of story this is."

"F...Find out on my own..." Does she think this is a game?!

"You're probably asking yourself if I think this is a game, but I'm not gonna tell you either way. That's the kind of story this is. But, this is the perfect time for me to add that I'm going to give you a hint. That's the kind of story this is, you see."

I gave up. Her speech was completely absurd. I couldn't even understand the point she was trying to make.

"Which means... what, exactly?"

"I just told you, didn't I? I'm gonna give you a hint!", Enoshima-san looked offended. "By the way, once I give you the hint my role here is over. After I give it, I'm going to go away without saying another word."

"Y...You're going to go away? You are? Really?!" I thrust my body forward instinctively. I felt energy like I've never felt before taking over my body. "Then tell me! And then go away!"

"...F...Fine, it's not like my feelings are hurt or anything!" Enoshima-san's lips trembled as if she was shocked at my unexpected joy. "By the way, this is important so make sure you write everything down."

"Sure, sure! I got it, so just get on with it!" As I pressed her, I took out my notebook. She coughed a little cough and raised her voice as if making an important announcement.

"Tah-daaaah! Here we go! This hint is all about 'Junko Enoshima-chan's goals'!" She made a V sign with her right hand. "There are *two* such goals!" She dropped one finger from her V and left her index finger pointing up. "Goal number one! To *thoroughly crush down this school's symbol of hope, Izuru Kamukura!*" Then, she raised her middle finger. "Goal number two!"

After a short pause for dramatic effect, she raised her voice to its maximum volume and continued.

"...To kill the beloved darling Yasuke Matsuda!"

I heard a *thump* and realized I dropped my notebook on the floor. My body stiffened. I couldn't even speak.

-- *To kill the beloved darling Yasuke Matsuda.*

Those incomprehensible words sprouted buds of fear, anxiety and confusion inside my body. The seeds grew and stretched in a single instant, fixing my body in place. I felt as if I was cast in plaster, unable to move even a single finger.

Enoshima-san watched my suddenly silent figure intently for a brief moment and then --

"....."

Everything was silent. Her mouth was a straight line, tightly closed, as if declaring her intention not to speak anymore. And then, after standing there quietly for a few seconds, Enoshima-san made a small goodbye wave with her hand and left my room.

The moment I heard the door closing my body lost every bit of its energy and I crouched, as if struck down by anemia.

"W...What the...?" My voice squeezed from deep within my throat, sounding like the chirps of a dying bird. "M...Matsuda-kun? She wants to...?"

-- *Kill?*

Kill. Kill. Kill. Kill. Kill. Kill.  
Kill. Kill. Kill. Kill. Kill. Kill.  
Kill. Kill. Kill. Kill. Kill. Kill.

The cruel word took over my entire world. "S...She can't... she definitely can't..."

My head was hot. Hot enough to make my hair rise.

"She can't do... such a thing..."

My chest was also hot. Intense burning emotion made my heart explode.

And then -- something strange happened.

Magma-like heat boiled up deep inside my stomach, gradually swelled inside my body and exploded when it reached my chest. It escaped my heart and reached every muscle in my body--

--I felt rejuvenated. Stimulated.

"I...! I CAN'T LET HER DO THIS!!!" I leaped out of the room and into the corridor, yelling. I ran like a bullet, in a fever I couldn't believe myself. The pages of Ryouko Otonashi's Memory Notebook fluttered in the wind.

As I listened to the flapping noise of my trusted partner, I screamed inside my heart.

-- *I will protect my own world!*

-- *I will save Matsuda-kun!*

I ran through the dormitory's corridors like a hurricane.

-- *Matsuda-kun, wait for me!*

-- *I will be there soon!*

Ryouko Otonashi is running. I am running -- so I can become the saviour of my and Matsuda-kun's world.

But, at the time, I hadn't noticed yet.

I hadn't noticed that my frantically working towards a goal was itself the beginning of my despair.

I hadn't yet noticed this despair-inducing reality.